

A CRACK COUNTY.

A CRACK COUNTY.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. EDWARD KENNARD,

Author of

“KILLED IN THE OPEN,” “THE GIRL IN THE BROWN HABIT,”
“A REAL GOOD THING,” ETC., ETC.

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I.—A REGULAR “CLINKER”	1
II.—“IF YOU MEAN LEAPING, DON’T LOOK LONG”	19
III.—RUN TO GROUND	39
IV.—BOB AND HIS KINDRED SPIRIT FALL OUT	57
V.—A FASHIONABLE STEEPLE-CHASE MEETING	76
VI.—AN AMATEUR FINISH	101
VII.—“I WOULD GIVE MY LIFE TO SERVE YOU”	121
VIII.—BOB RECEIVES A SEVERE SHOCK	140
IX.—LOVE BEFORE MONEY	161
X.—JUMPING MUDDYFORD BOTTOM	189
XI.—A PARTING BEQUEST	218
XII.—CONCLUSION	246

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A CRACK COUNTY.

CHAPTER I.

A REGULAR “CLINKER.”

AN expectant silence fell upon the hard-riding division of the field, whilst hounds were drawing the celebrated covert, known by the name of Pilkington Hill-side. Every sound made these eager Nimrods prick up their ears, and the shrill whistle of a distant train, striking suddenly on the air, was momentarily mistaken for a view halloo, and created quite a remarkable commotion, though one of short-lived duration.

Whilst less enthusiastic sportsmen stood

lighting up cigars and whiling away the time in desultory conversation, the more ardent spirits threaded their way dexterously through the crowd of horses, and stationed themselves opposite a five-barred gate, at a point where they considered the fox was most likely to break covert. They stood there like sentinels, ready, however, to dart off in pursuit directly Pug made an attempt to face the open. Scarce a sound did they utter, except an occasional oath, when some fidgety animal sidled or kicked, and so caused his rider to fall back and lose a place or two, besides provoking a general feeling of irritation.

But the minutes went by, and Reynard did not show himself, as was confidently anticipated. Not even a whimper burst from the throats of his enemies, and nought could be heard, save the steady crashing of twigs and grasses, as the hounds poked about among the thick

undergrowth and thoroughly investigated every likely spot. Now and again, one would steal out into the field, and there pause to take breath, before recommencing her labours. By-and-by others might be seen gazing disconsolately around, as if to give notice that they were quite as much disappointed as their human friends and allies at the way events were shaping.

Consternation now began to spread amongst the ranks. Jaws dropped, faces looked glum. Pilkington Hill-side blank? —and blank thus early in the season. What could the owner have been about, or what excuses had he to make for so disgraceful a state of things? He was too fond of shooting by a great deal. He was not half a sportsman. He ought to have cut down some of the undergrowth. It was ridiculously thick. The best hounds in the world might not succeed in finding a fox under such conditions, &c., &c. We

all know the sort of things that are said on these occasions. There must be a scape-goat, and he is nearly always the proprietor, who, poor man! nine times out of ten, feels the non-discovery of Pug far more keenly than the whole field put together, and needs not their reproaches to inflict a still deeper wound on his already lacerated feelings. Presently a rumour circulated to the effect that a tribe of starlings had visited the covert at the close of the last hunting season, and foxes in consequence had refused to make a home of Pilkington Hill-side, though the owner had done his best to encourage their presence.

Even then, until the very last moment, no one would believe that Pilkington actually held no specimen of the vulpine race. But when a quarter of an hour had elapsed, melancholy confirmation was given of the fact. Burnett blew his horn, and slowly, at his summons, the reluctant

hounds crept out and came clustering around him with wistful yellow eyes, which seemed to say: "Don't be angry with us. It was not our fault. We did our best to find him, but he was not there."

A short consultation now took place between huntsmen and master. The almost unprecedented event of Pilkington not furnishing the desired article had upset their calculations. Although the chance of a find was believed to be slight, it was now determined to call upon a long, narrow osier bed, lying close by, at the foot of the hill on which the company were assembled. So the field moved on, with hopes somewhat dashed by their non-success, and by the almost certain prospect of a long jog to the next covert. Whose was the blame, they knew not, but they felt injured and aggrieved. Hounds were perhaps more reasonable than bipeds. At all events they did not despond, and

were soon at work, drawing steadily and well.

Five minutes passed without result. The spirits of the company sank to zero. Such a grand scenting morning as it seemed, too, and by the afternoon all the conditions might have changed. Was there anything so unfortunate? Since Captain Straightem's death a spell of ill-luck had attended the hunt, and appeared likely to continue. So these giants of the chase bewailed themselves, like so many fretful and pampered children, who have not learnt to put up with the buffets of fate. Then, all of a sudden their whole mental attitude underwent a transformation; for from a dozen canine throats there came ringing out the deep, familiar music, which soon increased in volume, and made the echoes resound to its melodious notes. How cheering, how inspiring they were to that sad multitude! Every face beamed,

the lines of every mouth relaxed in a satisfied smile. Already their anticipations proved correct, and scent was good at all events in covert. Reynard took one swift turn up and down the whole length of the osier bed, hoping by so doing to baffle his pursuers ; but they were hot and keen, and left him little peace. Very shortly, finding the position untenable, he resolved to trust to his lissome limbs, and without further hesitation set his mask straight towards the open, boldly despising cowardly tactics. His long, red body, with its bushy brush could be seen stealing over the grass at a rapid rate. A hundred pairs of eyes viewed him, and half a score of manly voices simultaneously uttered a loud "Gone forward away." If anything could have persuaded the fox to make haste, those shrill demoniacal yells would have done so. They alone were sufficient to strike terror to the vulpine heart, and

convince its owner of the necessity of exertion.

Quick as lightning hounds dashed out of covert, and getting away close at their fox's heels, flung eagerly forwards, without once stooping to the scent. But at this juncture so critical to the interests of sport, those who ought to have known better, pressed and flurried the little ladies to such an extent, that they caused them to throw up their heads, before having had a chance of fairly settling to the line.

“Hounds, gentlemen, *please*,” pleaded Burnett half angrily, half imploringly. “For goodness sake don’t ride a-top of ‘em. Steady there, steady.”

Momentary as was the check that ensued—indeed, hardly worthy of the name—it had its use, since it gave Reynard an advantage, of which he promptly availed himself. A little breathing room was desirable, if only to choose his route and

the best mode of effecting an escape. And now the fun began in earnest. Hounds, after their brief uncertainty, raced ahead with a vigour delightful to behold. Over the huge hundred-acre field sped the pursuers, like an avalanche let loose, scattering in every direction ; some making off for the roads, some for the nearest gate, and others boldly pointing their horses' heads towards an extremely high and formidable-looking stake-bound hedge, through which the flying hounds had already disappeared. It was a "snorter" at starting, as more than one good man and brave seemed to think. Horses, too, like their masters, require warming, and prefer a reasonable impediment to begin with. Fortunately there was no time to look and crane for those who would be with hounds. It was a case of harden your heart or lose your place, perhaps for the whole run.

Doctor Lankester, Dot and Bob had

been fortunate in getting away well, and were riding all in a cluster, only a few lengths behind Burnett, who, in order to keep within sight of his hounds, was sending his horse along with a right good will.

Kingfisher, revelling in the enjoyment of stretching his limbs, was mad fresh, and pulled so hard that it was just as much as his rider could do to hold him. The fence was a big one, especially for the first, on an unknown horse. As they sailed down at it, it looked even bigger, the take-off side being ornamented by a very wide and deep-cut ditch, into whose depths had been stuffed sundry recently-cut twigs from the newly-plashed hedge. A stiff binder ran all along the top, as thick round as a man's wrist. He who had fashioned this formidable man-trap was evidently an adept in the art, and knew how to defy hunters as well as long-horned, broad-

browed oxen. Anyhow, he could not have devised a much more efficient stopper. But Kingfisher felt so wonderfully game and eager under her that Dot never hesitated for a moment. She judged, and judged rightly, that all the gallant horse wanted was to be close up with hounds, and in a position where he could see them constantly.

Burnett rode first at the fence, but his horse got a little too near the ditch, and in consequence just toed the top-binder, which, not yielding an inch, caused him to pitch heavily on landing, though his practised and powerful rider soon recovered him. Kingfisher, wild with excitement, almost tore the reins out of Dot's hands. His proud spirit could not brook the sight of one of his own race in front of him. The girl tried her very best to steady him, but was not successful in the attempt. As the next best thing, she gave him his head entirely,

resolving not to hinder if she could not help.

Oh! he had misjudged his distance. His stride was wrong! A horrible sensation of calamity made her heart stand still. He was bound to fall. Not he!

As soon as he saw that black fringe of twigs under his feet, he put in just one little step, and the next moment gave a glorious bound and landed light as a chamois on the opposite side, clearing those ugly binders by at least half a foot.

The warm blood surged back to Dot's heart in a triumphant wave, and elated all her being. She no longer mistrusted her horse, but, on the contrary, felt a wonderful confidence in him.

“Well done, Dot!” Dr. Lankester shouted out approvingly, as Sugarloaf landed within a few yards of her. “That was a nasty fence and no mistake. It is

astonishing how many people have been choked off already."

His words were true, for numbers were still coasting up and down, in search of a more practicable place, letting the precious minutes slip by rather than risk their necks over so uncompromising an impediment. Even when a fox *is* found, he does not always afford unmitigated pleasure to the majority.

Meantime Bob, after seeing Dot safely over, followed her example without delay. His horse made a magnificent fly, but the rider did not adhere to his saddle quite as closely as might have been desired by an observant critic. However, the trio were now together again, and felt well pleased with their performance, especially when they noticed the very select company of which they formed a part. It had become evident that this was no day for shirking.

Hounds were gliding along the green

pastures at racing pace—mute, but intent on murder—and those who would be with them must take fence for fence, exactly as it came, without losing a single second in search of the convenient gate. Even when they came to a deep-ploughed field, which stretched the girths of many a gallant steed, the scent still held good—too good some of the poor horses would have said, whose sides were panting, and whose nostrils were distended, till their outline formed an acute angle, beneath which the scarlet membrane showed clearly.

“Take a pull, Dot; take a pull,” shouted the doctor, as his daughter careered past him like an arrow shot from a bow. “It’s very heavy going, remember.”

“I would if I could, father, but I can’t. He’s so desperately keen, and I can’t hold him,” she called back in reply.

Dr. Lankester glanced at the chestnut’s beautiful thoroughbred form, with its cast-

iron muscles and long, sweeping stride, which covered the ground with the ease of machinery, and nodded his head reassuringly. There was not much fear of harm befalling her on such a horse, and, as he had prophesied, she had the "legs" of Sugarloaf, on whom the deep ground told.

Dot's feather-weight seemed nothing to Kingfisher. He had been accustomed to carry close upon fourteen stone, and he simply revelled in the difference. This slight, brave girl was one after his own heart. Her delicate handling was even superior to his late master's, and did not interfere with his sensitive mouth. Could he but have given his testimony he doubtless would have agreed with the well-known authority who stated "that there wouldn't be many falls if there were no bridles." Nine times out of ten it is the men themselves who are responsible for their mishaps, since they expect an animal to

jump held hard by the head—a sheer impossibility.

Creak, crack, crash! Half-a-dozen resolute riders charged the next fence in line. It proved to be a blind double into a road, and was productive of many noisy scrambles, and still noisier objurgations as horses floundered into the near or far ditches. Again Dot would have preferred to pull Kingfisher up to a trot and make him go slowly, but being more or less at his mercy she was forced to let him take it in his own fashion.

And his majesty pleased to fly the double, instead of popping on and off the bank. But he flew it in brilliant form, though he rather over-shot the mark, since neither his rider nor himself was prepared for another fence leading out of the road, over which the pack had sped with almost undiminished speed. In fact he was so taken by surprise that for the first and last

time in his life he almost refused. Almost, but not quite!

For the generous blood of the Darley Arabian which flowed through his veins recoiled at such an act of cowardice, especially when hounds were running hard, as in the present instance. Quick as lightning he changed his mind, and hopped over like a stag. To Bob, who followed close in his wake, no sign of hesitation was visible. That brief moment of indecision remained a secret between Kingfisher and his rider, and one of which he already felt ashamed as he galloped swiftly on.

But Dot was more and more delighted with her steed, and leaning forwards cooed words of soft encouragement in his ear. So far the line had been an uncommonly stiff one, and that double into the road caused almost as much "grief" as the starting fence. Dot saw no less than five riderless horses gallop past her, and, un-

charitable as it may sound, the sight increased her satisfaction, for it was impossible to help feeling that she had succeeded where others had failed ; although she was fully alive to the fact that the merit of the achievement belonged almost entirely to the finished performer on which Mr. Jarrett had been good enough to mount her. Was he among the fallen ? She hoped not. He deserved a better fate. No, close up galloped his good brown hunter, whilst Sugarloaf's white face was creeping along steadily but surely. Both Mr. Jarrett and her father had surmounted the difficulties of the double, and helped to swell the numbers of the little but resolute band now left with hounds. They were not many ; only about a dozen as far as she could tell, and she was the only lady.

Dot's pulses throbbed with pride ; this was indeed a red-letter day in her existence.

CHAPTER II.

“ IF YOU MEAN LEAPING, DON’T LOOK LONG.”

REYNARD, still finding himself hotly pursued, and beginning perhaps to feel a little beat by the pace, now bore away to the right, making for that beautiful, level grass country which spreads like a green spring-board between Worthington and Crackley.

Fences here were of a fairer character and, to experienced hunters, rendered easy by the good, sound turf that formed such admirable taking-off and landing. No need to do follow-my-leader now. With a few exceptions half-a-dozen practicable spots presented themselves in every hedge, and the leaders sailed over each successive obstacle without drawing rein. For the

space of ten minutes it was more like steeplechasing than hunting. As they raced side by side horses laid back their ears, and evidently enjoyed the emulation as much as did their masters.

To Dot, the relief of being able to stride along was immense. She could now let Kingfisher gallop, and rest her over-strained arms, the muscles of which had for some time past been quivering under the unaccustomed tension. The gallant horse stretched out his neck and snatched gaily at the bit. A real fast thing was what he revelled in, and he felt satisfied at last. With his fine blue eye fixed on the leading hounds, and turning of his own accord, to the right or to the left, exactly as he saw them bend, he maintained a forward place throughout.

Between Dot and himself a complete sympathy was by this time established. He had long since realized that she meant

“going,” and would neither irritate his mouth nor baffle him at his fences, and she, on her part, had discovered his pulling arose solely from keenness and extra anxiety, and that he was in all respects a most brilliant and clever hunter. The worst of it was, she could not help breaking the tenth commandment, and wishing he were her very own ; for when other horses were falling to the rear, and holding out signals of exhaustion, it was such a delightful and intoxicating sensation to feel that Kingfisher could easily maintain his speed without distressing himself in the slightest degree, since whilst his companions were galloping he was only cantering.

This knowledge added still more to Dot’s elation. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks were adorned by a warm flush that made them very beautiful to look at, and her small mouth opened in panting ecstasy. Oh ! this was glorious. The enjoyment of

a lifetime seemed compressed into these fleeting minutes. She felt a different being, transported out of her usual, quiet, humdrum self. Such a run made one believe that life was worth living, and was a rich and inestimable blessing for which people themselves were to be blamed if they did not enjoy. Danger! Who thought of danger when the blood coursed like wildfire in one's veins, and one's whole being thrilled with the rapture of the chase? How strange that same rapture was, too, when one came to reflect upon it. All the host of horsemen and women, all the staff and retinue and expense, all the emulation, the heart-burnings, the ambition, the short-lived triumphs and long-remembered disappointments, just for a little red animal. Wherein did the attraction and fascination consist? It was a species of madness, but a madness more insidious and exciting than any known pleasure. The sense of pure

animal enjoyment was so great. And yet when the day was done, when the fever had cooled and the chase over, what gain did it bring ! what profit to the mind? Very little, if the answer were given truthfully. Bumps and blows and bruises to the body, and nought, or next to nought, to the brain.

Some such thoughts flashed through Dot's mind as she continued her victorious career and tried to analyze the strength and keenness of her emotions. But it was no time for introspective reflections. Another fence loomed ahead, and she promptly had to abandon them. There was a burning scent on the grass. The pace increased until it became something terrific, and the company rapidly grew more and more select. A hurried, backward view revealed a tail nearly a mile in length, and the fields were dotted with black and scarlet specks, labouring

along as best they could, and riding that hardest of all hard rides—a stern chase.

Those immediately with hounds might have been counted on the fingers of one's two hands. On the left was Burnett, his horse showing unmistakable symptoms of having had enough. In his rear, a gallant cavalry officer, and a hard-riding farmer, mounted on a wonderful screw, that for several seasons past had scoffed at three and four hundred guinea hunters, with their sound limbs too good for use, and their big bodies full of thirty-three shillings a quarter oats. To the right, trying hard to maintain his pride of place, yet with the pace all the time against him, Doctor Lankester cut out the work, and continued to make a gallant struggle on his good grey mare. But her elevated tail and drooping head showed that her bolt also was nearly shot, unless an opportune check took place soon to enable her to get her

wind. Sugarloaf was fast, but not a racer, and she had been asked to go at topmost speed for the last twenty minutes; only her stout heart had kept her in the van so long. A solitary attendant followed the doctor’s fortunes, a lad of sixteen or seventeen, riding a thoroughbred horse with a pedigree a yard long, who was being qualified for hunt steeplechases, and who, in spite of having embraced mother earth, was still to the fore.

The central group consisted of Bob Jarrett and a remarkably select contingent. Served by the excellence of his nag, the former had for some time past gallantly shown the way to his immediate division, which consisted only of Dot Lankester and two well-known members of the hunt. Bob was riding a young blood-hunter of very superior quality, else he could never have held his own.

But what he wanted in experience he

made up for in “pluck,” and Dot could not help admiring the lion-hearted manner in which on one or two occasions he led the whole field. Courage always appeals to a woman. There are few things for which she entertains a greater liking and respect. Let her once convict a man of cowardice, and she never thinks the same of him again. He may be ever so nice, in a hundred different ways, but henceforth she invariably views him with a certain amount of contempt. Bob’s nerve won him golden opinions from Dot, and once or twice her smile of approbation made his heart beat fast with rising hope.

And now, this bold, stout-hearted fox, finding that as long as he kept to the grass his enemies pressed upon him closer and closer, resolved to make one last bid for his brush. He therefore tried the effect of a little dodging. No doubt he was pretty well done, and therefore hailed the close

proximity of a village with thanksgiving. A few ingenious turns and twists might baffle his mortal foes even at the eleventh hour.

So he carefully wended his way through gardens and farmyards, past cottages and barns and outhouses. Yet the shelter he sought he could not find. None seemed entirely safe, not even that old, hollow tree standing in an orchard, whose roots had formed many little tortuous tunnels under the brown earth. Possibly, spades and fox-terriers flashed across his mind's eye.

Nevertheless, he succeeded in embarrassing his pursuers, and in obtaining a few minutes' respite. Just five and forty minutes after he had left the osier-bed, hounds threw up their heads, and looking uncertainly about them, came to a sudden halt within one field of Smallborough village. Horsemen flung themselves from their panting steeds, and critically examined

scratched legs and spur-marked sides, holding the bridles in their hands so as to be able to remount at any moment. But the poor nags seemed in no hurry to renew their exertions—quivering tails, heaving flanks, outstretched necks, told a sad tale of distress in the majority of cases.

Meantime, hounds were feathering about in several directions, with noses and sterns both busy. Burnett let them try to puzzle it out, but they failed to take up the line. Then, with a ringing cheer and a “*huic forrard, forrard, my beauties!*” he lifted them, and made a scientific cast, whilst his followers watched the proceedings without moving, and wondered how the dickens it was, that in ten good runs out of a dozen, those infernal roadsters invariably contrived to turn up just when they were *not* wanted, and did the greatest possible amount of mischief. *Helter-skelter, gallopy-gallop,* here they come, clattering over the stony

macadam at topmost speed, and with a ruthless disregard for joints and sinews. Such a noise as they made too. A regiment of soldiers would have appeared silent as mice in comparison.

Of course they headed the fox. That was a foregone conclusion, for was there ever a roadster who didn't? But to this fact the whole tribe are contemptuously indifferent. They don't go out to *hunt*, but to *gallop*. Not on the grass, mind you. Not over the spacious green fields where they could do little harm. No; they are afraid. They might come across mole-hills, or rabbit-holes, or even have to jump, an idea which makes the blood in their veins run cold. Only on the road do they feel safe from all such horrid possibilities, and therefore to the road do they cleave, like limpets to a rock. But we will give the mighty army of roadsters their due, and to do them justice, they can *talk*. Not one of

the number who has not some marvellous experiences to record, and who is not supremely satisfied with his individual performances. Perhaps it is only natural that the men who have jumped every fence as it came, without shirking, who have imperilled their limbs, if not their necks, and made acquaintance with mother earth in her hardest and most disagreeable form —namely, when she rises up and greets you between the eyes—should harbour a contemptuous hostility against the spiritless babblers who come swarming around the moment all danger is over.

But by this time Burnett had succeeded in hitting off the line of his fox. Whilst trotting down a road the hounds suddenly stopped, and one by one, creeping under a stiff, hog-backed stile, once more threw their tongues in deadly fashion, which made all the dismounted gentlemen leap to their horse's backs, tossing away just lit

cigars and half-tasted sandwiches. Perhaps they would not have been in quite such a hurry had they known what a formidable obstacle awaited them.

Their ardour had cooled a little, and few of the horses displayed much spirit. They would have preferred some extra minutes' repose, but it was not to be. In spite of the pace, Reynard had still a fair share of life left in him.

Nevertheless, that same hog-backed stile was by no means a pleasing prospect to tired-out animals still catching at their breath. Yet there was not any other egress, the fence on either side being quite seven feet high, and as thick and solid as a stone wall. The thing had to be done, but nobody liked to attempt it first. Even Burnett paused, though the exhausted condition of his horse rendered the delay not merely wise, but imperative. If only hounds would check. But no ; they stole

ahead with renewed confidence, every now and again one or other of them giving tongue, and all their bristles up, as if their fox were quite close in front.

Doctor Lankester was a brave man, and, in spite of his forty odd years, had nerves of iron. His blood was up. Sugar-loaf happened to be particularly good at timber, and she had in a measure regained her wind. His daughter and Mr. Jarrett were among the little anxious throng who blocked the roadway. (The roadsters had already galloped off.)

Dot knew the meaning of that keen sparkle in her father's eye, accompanied by a sudden contraction of the brow. It signified business.

“ You are not going to jump it, are you, papa ? ” she inquired with some uneasiness.

“ Yes,” came the resolute reply. Then, looking round, he sang out, quoting the

Australian poet, poor Adam Lindsay Gordon, for whose verses he entertained a great admiration :

“ Look before you leap if you like,
But if you mean leaping, don’t look long,
Or the weakest place will soon grow stiff,
And the strongest doubly strong.”

“ Give me a little room, there’s good fellows,” he wound up persuasively.

And with that he went at the stile.

A tremendous rattle. Sugarloaf hit all round, but the pair were over with a scramble. Doctor Lankester looked back to see who would follow his example. It was a very awkward leap after so long and fast a run. Still, was *nobody* coming?

Yes, there was one, and one moreover of his own kith and kin. He shuddered and closed his eyes. The girl inherited her father’s spirit, but he had rather she had been less brave. He tried to call out and tell her not to come, but Dot had already started.

She set Kingfisher resolutely at the stile, and just touched him with her hunting crop.

Bob uttered an exclamation of alarm, which immediately changed to one of admiration, for the noble hunter, getting his legs well under him, bounded with the lightness and springiness of a fawn over the stiff, unyielding timber, giving a playful grunt of satisfaction as he landed. Dot patted his swelling neck enthusiastically. He was a king among hunters.

“Oh, you beauty! You are a real ripper!” she exclaimed, using a slang expression for want of any better to convey the full warmth of her sentiments.

Bob felt he should despise himself if he were outdone by a woman, but more especially by such a slight, delicate-bodied little thing. Besides, he could not bear to let her out of his sight. His love was rapidly becoming a vehement passion.

Therefore he also rode at the stile, but

he went at it a little too fast, and giving his horse a job in the mouth, flurried him unnecessarily. As a consequence, Paragon caught the top bar with both knees, and executed a complete somersault, for some little time lying quite motionless where he fell.

When Bob rose from the ground he found that Dot had pulled up, and was looking commiseratingly down at him, with an air of anxious pity disquieting her sweet, young face.

"Oh, Mr. Jarrett!" she cried, "are you hurt?"

"No, not a bit," he answered cheerily. "Don't wait for me; I'm all right, and hounds are still running. I shall be in at the death yet. You go on."

As he turned to put his foot in the stirrup—Paragon fortunately having stood still after his fall—Bob suddenly became aware of the fact that a pair of very blue

eyes were staring at him from the road with an exceedingly scornful and outraged expression. Their owner wore a scarlet jacket, and had arrived on the scene just in time to witness Dot Lankester's bold jump and Bob's unsuccessful attempt to follow suit.

“ You'd have done much better if you had taken my advice, and stuck to the roads,” she called out sarcastically, and with no evidence of concern at his mishap.

“ I don't think so, your ladyship, though I admit that it's all a matter of opinion.”

“ Who's your friend ? ” she rejoined, in a tone which made his blood boil.

But he ignored this interrogation altogether, and galloped off in pursuit of the hounds, who were quite a couple of fields ahead, gaining inch by inch upon the failing quarry, whose aim was now evident to those acquainted with the country.

As his last resource, poor Pug was

gallantly trying to make for some earths about two miles distant from Smallborough, in whose safe depths many a hunted fox had ere now saved his brush. Would he reach them or would he not? If he did, should he find them open or closed? How his vulpine heart must have beat with anxiety. For the answer to this question meant life or death to him.

The poor little red animal was very, very weary. His beautiful brush was all draggled and soiled, his limbs were stiff, his body damp with perspiration.

Hounds, horses, men, all were against him, and yet for the best part of an hour he had defied them with indomitable energy.

Surely he deserved his life. If foxes must pay the penalty, then let the bad ones go, and leave the good, straight-running, stout-hearted fellows for another day.

They are not so plentiful that we should slay them willingly, or rejoice when we do

so. Courage, even in the much-maligned “thief of the world,” merits some recognition. A good fox plays a desperate game, and if he wins, none should grudge him the victory. In any case, the pains and terrors of death have been anticipated.

“Only an animal,” say some. “It does not matter whether it suffers or not.”

Perhaps so; yet how know these good folk, with their narrow-minded positivism, that man differs from the brute creation as greatly as they flatter themselves? There are some very strange points of similitude; amongst others the burden of pain which every living thing has to bear, and which incontestibly connects beast and biped. Life is painful, so is death, to all creatures created by God.

The hunted animal straining every nerve to escape from his tormentors, may not possess a soul, according to our sense of the word, but yet he *feels*.

CHAPTER III.

R U N T O G R O U N D .

DOT LANKESTER for one, had no wish to see the poor fox killed. Her tender heart recoiled from any approach to cruelty, and, much as she delighted in the fun, the movement and excitement of hunting, the final obsequies always brought a sense of depression, not wholly free from disgust. Her sympathies were invariably with the slain, not the slayers. If the chase could have been conducted without destroying life, she would have liked it even better than she did, for she never could bear to witness the tortured creature's dying struggles, or the subsequent dismemberment of his stiffened body. Well and

pluckily as she rode to hounds, she was essentially feminine by nature, and had all a true woman's sympathy with and compassion for suffering in every shape or form.

Therefore it was an intense relief to her feelings when, too closely pressed to reach the earths already spoken of, Pug, to the infinite disappointment of huntsman and hounds, succeeded in gaining the shelter of an unsuspected drain, running across one corner of a large grass field. For several minutes previously the eager pack had raced him in full view of the scarcely less eager field. Horses and men alike caught the enthusiasm of their canine friends. The air rang with different cries proceeding from many throats, human and otherwise. Twice old Merrylass, always foremost in the fray, and leading by a good couple of lengths, snapped at him, and almost rolled him over. Despair lent him fresh fleetness of

foot, but such supreme effort could not be maintained. It seemed any odds against the fox. Fifty seconds more, and they must have had him, when suddenly he disappeared from vision.

A dismal howl burst from his thwarted foes, as with hanging tongues and open jowls, they gathered round the small aperture through which their prey had squeezed, but which would not allow of the passage of their larger bodies. They felt themselves baffled when most they deserved success, and took the disappointment sorely to heart, as their angry and excited baying testified.

Once more horsemen dismounted, and horses opened their heated nostrils to the refreshing breeze, and stood panting, whilst the white foam on their sides and necks gradually hardened and grew stiff. Then watches were produced from waistcoat pockets and compared minutely.

After some consultation, it was agreed that this fine run, including the slight check at the commencement, and the longer one in Smallborough village, had lasted exactly one hour and a half; the first forty-five minutes at racing pace, the remainder slower, but still sufficiently fast to tax the powers of most ordinary hunters. Of the stoutness and gallantry of the fox there could be no two opinions, since Burnett was confident he was the same animal that had been viewed away from the osier-bed. Even those most murderously inclined admitted that so gallant a fellow deserved his life; but huntsmen are proverbially a blood-thirsty race, actuated by few sentiments of pity, and Burnett was no exception to the rule. His humanity was completely subordinate to the love he bore his hounds, and he could not bear to see his darlings deprived of their due. The better they had hunted,

the more they merited reward. They deserved blood, and blood—if it were possible—he was determined they should have, and for himself another mask to hang up over the kennel door.

Therefore one of the whips was immediately despatched to borrow spades and a terrier. He shortly reappeared on the scene, accompanied by a small army of idle men and boys, who had gleefully sallied forth from Smallborough in order to watch the chase, and who now set to work with a will at either end of the drain, which they sought to enlarge. As is usual on such occasions, every one had either an opinion or advice to offer. After a while, the proceedings, being unattended by success, grew wearisome to a degree. No amount of digging could persuade Reynard to bolt. He altogether declined a fresh contest, preferring to endure a martyrdom of terror rather than face that

row of cruel, wide-open mouths, with their hot breath and sharp white teeth.

When over half-an-hour had gone by, and some significant grumbling began to be heard amongst the best subscribers to the hunt, Burnett was at length reluctantly forced to give the fox up.

It was too soon to go home, so, though hounds and horses had had pretty well enough, Lord Littelbrane resolved to draw again ; a decision which met with the approval of the majority.

When this was finally settled and people began to move off, Dot, who had been talking to some friends, rode up to Bob's side and said :

“ Mr. Jarrett, I come to you for instructions.”

“ What about,” he replied. “ I hope you do not look upon me as a mentor.”

“ Oh ! dear no ; but as I am riding your horse I do not like to keep him out longer

than you think fit. Therefore will you tell me honestly if I ought to go home?"

"And will you tell me in the same frank and candid spirit, whether you yourself are tired?"

"I? Not a bit. I mean," endeavouring to be strictly truthful, "only a very little."

"And you would like just to see what hounds do, of course. Come, Miss Lankester, confess."

"Well, yes, I should; if you don't mind about Kingfisher."

"Mind? Why should I mind? As far as I can judge he is fresher than any other horse that went through the run. He makes nothing of your weight."

"I don't think you could do the horse any harm by staying out a little longer, Dot," here interposed her father, who had overheard the above conversation. "Lord Littelbrane has given Burnett orders to draw Rapthorne, which is all on our way

home, and if the hounds don't find there, they are bound to jog back in the direction of the kennels. So let's be starting. Our horses have got cold enough as it is. That digging-out work is always detestable."

Hounds and huntsman now made a fresh move, followed by a procession, considerably diminished since the morning, though what it wanted in quantity it made up for in quality, those who remained to test the further fortunes of the day being mostly good men and true.

Burnett let the hounds proceed at a leisurely pace. They still seemed tired after their recent exertions, and a bit down-hearted at the escape of their fox, on whom they had surely counted. Neither did the old hunters present appear to approve of this new call on their powers. After being at fever-heat their blood had got thoroughly chilled, from standing about so long in the cold afternoon air, and many of them

seemed very stiff and weary, their morning ardour having entirely evaporated.

Bob had been looking about for his second horseman, who, up till now, had failed to put in an appearance, but just as the cavalcade was jogging slowly along through Smallborough, and the public-houses were being besieged by a thirsty host for beer, or anything they could produce in the way of drink, he spied him issuing from a back yard, and immediately changed horses.

Paragon had probably sprained himself when he fell, for he was now quite lame, and Bob felt only too glad to get off his back, since nothing is more trying to the feelings of a humane man than to be forced to ride a tired and halting animal. That irregular bobbing up and down of the ears is a most unpleasant sight to tender-hearted people.

By the time Bob had scolded his groom

for not having come up with the others, given him strict orders not to take Paragon out of a walk, and made friends with his fresh steed—a very handsome bay, with rather a wicked eye—he had fallen some little way in the rear of his companions. He was just emerging from the yard where he had mounted, with the intention of making up lost ground, when, to his infinite discomfiture, he found himself suddenly accosted by no less a person than Lady De Fochsey. He smothered an exclamation of annoyance.

Nemesis seemed to pursue him in the shape of this woman, and he blamed himself a thousand times for ever having been such a weak fool as to give her encouragement, when he knew quite well in his own heart that she was, and always would be, absolutely indifferent to him. But he would take precious good care how he did so again. He wanted none of her

specious entanglements and artificial love-making. He might, perhaps, have forgiven her for being silly, but he could not forgive her for being a bore. Oh! if Lady De Fochsey could have read his thoughts!

But her ladyship also nourished a grievance, and felt she had a crow to pluck with her quondam friend. He had been singularly inattentive throughout the day, and being both piqued and indignant she wanted to know the reason why her spiritual affinity had not responded more readily to the advances graciously made him. Were they of too delicate and impalpable a nature? She could hardly believe it.

Though caring for hunting more on account of the society than the sport, Lady De Fochsey went fairly well at times, especially when she wished to impress an admirer with her powers of equitation.

She had been quite ready to do this in Bob's case, had he but given her a chance and displayed just a little consideration ; but that stake-bound fence was a size too big, and choked her off at starting. As well as she could, she had sedulously striven to keep an eye upon the young man, but her jealousy had not been fully aroused until she witnessed his attempt to follow Dot Lankester out of the road and over the stile. Having scuttled round by a gate, and the concluding portion of the run being over a comparatively easy country, she had ridden the line after a fashion.

True, forty or fifty people going first, contrived to divest the fences of much of their stiffness, but still her ladyship was near enough to hounds to be able to see what the leaders were about. And each time she looked she saw her medium—her affinity — her precious psychological edu-

cator, riding with that little insignificant slip of a girl on the chestnut horse.

Who could this young person be? She—Lady De Fochsey—had not the slightest knowledge of her, had never even noticed her out hunting before, though of course had it not been for Mr. Jarrett's absurd conduct, there was no reason why she should.

The young person—it pleased her to designate her enemy thus—evidently moved in a humble social sphere. She was a nobody. Why? Oh! because of her “get up.” The tail of Dot’s habit-body (Lady De Fochsey never had an opportunity of seeing the front) was cut in a fashion quite four years old, and moreover it was ornamented by four buttons below the waist instead of two; a thing which, in the eyes of a lady who wore “pink,” stamped the owner at once. Every woman in society knew that four buttons had gone out ever so long ago, indeed that they had

never met with approval amongst the *élite*. Dot's habit proclaimed her insignificance.

All the same, Lady De Fochsey scented a rival, and was agitated by the mere suspicion of Mr. Jarrett's proving indifferent to her own charms. It would be beyond a joke if, when for the first and last time in her life she had fallen desperately in love with a man, because she recognised in him certain lofty attributes which harmonized with her own nature, that man were to have the audacity and the inconceivable bad taste to get up a flirtation with another woman right under her very nose. The thing must be inquired into, and immediately.

“Well! Mr. Jarrett,” she exclaimed with forced amiability. “I have hardly had a word with you to-day.”

He bowed. “No, your ladyship. Hounds have kept us otherwise employed.”

“ Ah ! those hounds. I don’t know whether to feel angry with them or not. But, no matter. Have you enjoyed yourself ? ”

“ Exceedingly, up to the present moment.”

“ You have friends staying with you, have you not ? ” she inquired, as they trotted on at a brisk pace.

“ Oh, dear, no,” he answered, thrown off his guard. “ What made you think so ? ”

“ Isn’t the beautiful being staying at Straightem with whom you have been riding about all day long, to the total exclusion of your other acquaintances ? ” She could not help infusing a little vinegar into the interrogation.

“ I have hardly any acquaintances except yourself, and really,” reddening to the roots of his hair, “ I do not know whom you mean by the ‘ beautiful being.’ ”

“ Oh ! nonsense, don’t pretend to be so innocent. You know quite well that I’m talking about that little dowdy girl, in the funny old-fashioned habit, which looks as if it belonged to some antediluvian period.”

Bob bit his lips, but made no reply. To tell the truth, he was too much annoyed to speak, unless absolutely obliged. But his companion left him no peace.

“ Who is she ? ” she persisted, bent on satisfying her curiosity.

“ She is what every woman is not,” he rejoined shortly, “ a lady.”

It was her turn to colour now. The words might have meant nothing, but she did not exactly like them, especially coming from him.

“ Oh ! of course,” she retaliated with a toss of her head. “ One takes that for granted, but even if she is a lady, I suppose so remarkable a fact, and one I

should never have guessed without being told, does not prevent her from having a name."

"No, naturally it does not."

"Well? dear me, how tiresome you are, what is it?"

"Lankester," said Bob with extreme reluctance, wishing he might sink into the earth, or she might sink into the earth, so as to put an end to this odious and embarrassing cross-examination.

"What!" exclaimed Lady De Fochsey sneeringly. "The wife of the little doctor who rides so hard, and who, now I come to think of it, lives in your village?"

"No, not the wife; the daughter."

"The daughter. But, my dear Bob, that's ever so much worse."

"I really can't see why," he retorted, beginning to lose his temper.

"Can't you. A flirtation with a married woman in so humble a sphere may be

ridiculous, but it is not likely to have any serious consequences."

"I don't know what you mean by 'serious consequences,'" he said angrily.

She lifted up her head and looked him straight in the face.

"Bob," she said impressively, "I think you know me well enough by this time to be aware how thoroughly I have your interest at heart."

"I am sure you are very good," he mumbled sheepishly, not knowing exactly what to say in return.

"Not at all, but I intend to presume upon our friendship to give you some sensible advice, which I hope you will take in the same spirit as it is meant."

"Thanks, you are awfully kind, Lady De Fochsey; but really, I'm not particularly fond of advice."

"Never mind, it's for your good."

CHAPTER IV.

BOB AND HIS KINDRED SPIRIT FALL OUT.

“ADVICE generally is for one’s good, in the opinion of the giver, though not always in that of the recipient,” he said plaintively.

“Now, look here Bob, if you don’t look out, you’ll end by making a fool of yourself.”

“Thank you, Lady De Fochsey. Is that what you wanted to say?”

“Partly, but not entirely; I wish to bring the fact home to your mind. You have evidently taken some sort of silly, boyish fancy to this young person whose name is Lankester——”

“Miss Lankester,” he interrupted sternly.

“ Well, Miss Lankester, if you like it better,” she resumed, a little frightened by his tone; “ we need not quarrel about a mere matter of nomenclature. But what I intended to say was this: It won’t do,” looking at him fixedly; “ you’ll have to drop it.”

If she had been a man, he could have struck her. As it was, he made a powerful effort, and curbed his wrath sufficiently to say, with what was meant for biting sarcasm :

“ I’m much obliged to your ladyship, and if all advice were like yours its frankness would atone for its singularity. But allow me to state that it is quite uncalled for.”

“ Bob, Bob, don’t be so foolish and stiff-necked.”

“ I may be foolish, but I am not stiff-necked.”

“ Yes, you are—both. You are falling

into a regular trap, and wilfully shutting your eyes to facts."

"*Trap* is a very strong word to employ."

"It may be, but it's the only one that correctly expresses the state of affairs. Those people are making a most shameful set at you, especially the girl—little impudent minx!"

"No such thing," he said indignantly.
"You are very much mistaken there."

Her ladyship gave a superior smile, which seemed to say, "Tut, it's absurd to deny the truth. You can't deceive me; I'm far too sharp." Then she said with ever increasing animation :

"The fact of the matter is, Bob, you are new to English life, and don't understand all the petty plotting and scheming that goes on in our country villages to secure a rich young man with twelve or fifteen thousand a year, for a husband. No doubt it would be a very excellent thing for Miss

Lankester, the doctor's daughter, to become Mrs. Robert Jarrett, and mistress of Straightem Court. But looking upon it impartially, would it be quite so excellent a thing for Mr. Robert Jarrett? There can be but one answer to that question. Certainly not. Mr. Jarrett would lose by the connection, and do himself an infinity of harm. This is a very fastidious neighbourhood. Fortune has placed you in an elevated position, but if you wish not to disgrace that position, and to get on in the county, you must marry some one of birth belonging to your own station, instead of the first little nobody who happens to take your fancy. Bob, dear Bob," laying her hand on his horse's mane for a second, and looking coaxingly up into his face, "I don't think you ought to have much difficulty in finding a suitable person, if you are really and truly desirous of getting married."

He was by no means a vain man, yet as he bashfully turned away his head, so as to avoid her winning glances, he could not prevent certain embarrassing thoughts from flashing across his brain. If he were not very prudent in his conduct, this woman was quite capable of getting him into a most horrible mess almost before he knew what he was about ; she was so artful, so insinuating, so—so *snake-like*. He was fiercely vexed, too, at having his secret dragged to light and dissected in this ruthless manner. Had he been sure of Dot's sentiments, it might not have mattered so much, but as things were, it was insufferable hearing his affairs discussed.

“ I don’t care twopence whether I get on in the county or not,” he said irritably. “ And as for getting married—surely one may speak to a girl without being immediately accused of making love to her.”

“ I said that this Miss Lankester was making love to you.”

“ Then, Lady De Fochsey, you said what was not true, and I must ask you not to repeat the remark.”

“ Hoity, toity ! What a temper you’ve got, to be sure. It strikes me the ‘beautiful being’ has played her cards uncommonly well, to have produced so great an impression in so short a space of time.”

Lady De Fochsey was aware of the fact that in letting her jealousy get the better of her prudence, she was only losing ground, but she could not help herself. She was too angry and too mortified to be wise.

“ You don’t seem to understand,” said Bob, trying to allay his companion’s suspicions, “ that it is but natural I should feel gratefully inclined towards the only people who have shown me any civility since I set foot in Stiffshire.”

Here was an opening of which she promptly took avail.

“Oh ! Bob ! how can you say such a thing ? Have not *I* shown you civility, and—and—” lowering her voice to a caressing whisper—“would not I show you ever so much more, if only you would let me ? It is you who are stand-off, not me.”

“There’s a great difference between being stand-off and being too gushing,” he replied with downright brutality, feeling that this must be put a stop to at once if he would retain his liberty of action.

The remark incensed her beyond measure, proving as it did, that she had completely failed to produce any permanent impression.

“I suppose you mean to imply that *I* am too gushing, because I was foolish enough to think you a kindred spirit. Let me assure you, I have quite recovered from the delusion.” And she drew herself

up and looked at him with flashing eyes ; for this last observation of his had offended her past forgiveness.

“Indeed, Lady De Fochsey, I had no intention of hurting your feelings.”

“Pooh ! my feelings” (hysterically). “What do you care for them ? Go to your doctor’s daughter, since you have the bad taste to prefer her to me. I shall rise high in the astral plane, but you—you will sink, dragged down by your low connections, and in all probability reappear in some future existence as a donkey or an ape. That will be your fate, and one most richly deserved, for you possessed possibilities of ennoblement, and refused to develop them ; opportunities of psychic culture were given you, but your base, sensual, material nature triumphed over the diviner elements, and you proved yourself unworthy. Good-bye, Mr. Jarrett ; I have done with you for ever. Some day, when my free and emancipated

spirit is soaring in waves of ether, yours will be prisoned in a low, bestial form, degraded and debased by your own fault, and by your wilful insensibility to elevating influences."

And so saying, the outraged and "charming" woman rode swiftly away, leaving her companion in a state of utter bewilderment. What had he done to provoke her wrath? Again and again he tried to assign a reason. He could not believe that jealousy alone was responsible for such extraordinary behaviour, and finally fell back upon the conclusion that most decidedly she had a bee in her bonnet. Well! he had got rid of her at any rate, which was something, though he was sorry an actual rupture should have taken place. Still he scarcely blamed himself. Her ladyship's conduct from first to last had been eccentric, embarrassing and impossible.

Was it his fault that he could not respond to her advances, or profess a belief in all the spiritualistic shams she employed, as a cloak to sanctify her flirtations? He hardly thought so. Anyhow a good hunting run of three quarters of an hour soon caused him to dismiss the matter from his mind—at least temporarily.

When the chase was over, and the Lankesters turned their horses' heads towards home, he immediately followed suit. He was beginning to feel almost like one of the family, and the day's sport had done a great deal to consolidate friendship on either side.

In Doctor Lankester's presence, the conversation could not assume a very personal character and almost as if she were conscious of this fact, Dot chatted away with unusual freedom and gaiety.

“Are you coming to our hunt steeple-chases, Mr. Jarrett?” she inquired, after

every incident of the two runs had been fully discussed with retrospective satisfaction.

“What races?” he asked, making the question an excuse to sidle close up to Kingfisher.

“The Morbey Anstead meeting. It comes off at the end of next week.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of it. You see how remiss I am in the county news. Are you going by any chance?” glancing shyly at her.

“I haven’t an idea. It depends so much upon papa. But I should like to go immensely.”

Bob made no immediate reply. He was maturing a most delightful plan which, at her words, seized strong hold of his imagination, and opened out fresh opportunities of meeting.

“Look here, doctor,” he said after a bit, “you and your daughter and Mrs.

Lankester had much better come to these races with me. It's no use our going in separate traps when we live so close to one another. There's a big old omnibus in my coach-house, which would be just the thing for a day's outing, and of course I'll provide lunch, drink and all the rest of it. Eh! what do you say to the proposition?"

"An excellent one, as far as the Lankester family are concerned," replied the doctor heartily, who by this time had conceived a wonderful fancy for Bob, and accepted this offer of hospitality without any feelings of false pride. "I think I can answer for Dot, and as for myself, next to a day's hunting, there's nothing I like more than a day's steeplechasing, if only I can leave my patients."

"That's settled, then," said Bob. "Miss Dot," turning to the girl, "I count upon you not to forget the arrangement, or to throw me over at the last moment."

“Very well, Mr. Jarrett,” she replied, thinking how kind and good-natured he was. “I shall endeavour to prove that your confidence is not misplaced. But you will spoil us if you go on at this rate.”

They continued their homeward journey until the red-brick houses of Straightem village peered through the misty twilight. The moment had come to part. Bob reluctantly held out his hand. The doctor wrung it warmly. His wife’s statement was quite forgotten, therefore he could behave naturally.

“Good-bye, Jarrett,” he exclaimed. “I am sorry this pleasant day has come to an end.”

“And so am I,” rejoined Bob; “but I hope we shall spend many similar ones in each other’s company. Good-bye, Miss Dot,” with the blood surging to his cheek. “Have you also enjoyed yourself?”

“Immensely,” she replied enthusiasti-

cally. Then, feeling that she could not let him go without expressing her gratitude in more orthodox form, she added in tones full of genuine emotion :

“ I shall look back to to-day all my life, and I only wish, Mr. Jarrett, that I could thank you properly for your kindness, but that is impossible ; nevertheless, believe me, I appreciate it none the less.”

“ Tut ! Don’t make me feel uncomfortable by exalting an ordinary act of friendship into one of generosity. And look here, Miss Dot, now that you have made Kingfisher’s acquaintance, and he has proved himself worthy of the honour of carrying you to hounds, I want you to take him whenever you like. From this moment consider him yours, to do exactly what you please with ; I shan’t ride him this winter.”

“ Oh ! but, Mr. Jarrett, indeed you must. Why ! he is your best horse.”

“All the more reason for you to have him. He will stand in my stables, because he is used to them, and I have promised old Matthews never to part with him actually; but whenever you want to go hunting, even if your father cannot come, just send me word, and Kingfisher shall be ready.”

As she looked at Bob’s honest face, and with a pang of pain noted the admiration shining from his eyes, the tears insensibly welled up into her own. She was deeply touched—more even than she liked to let him see.

“Mr. Jarrett,” she said, in an undertone not meant even for her father’s ears, “you are too good. Don’t think me ungrateful, but, indeed—indeed—I cannot ride Kingfisher any more.”

“Why not?” he asked in surprise.
“Don’t you like him?”

“Oh! yes. It’s not that. He’s simply

perfection. But—but——” growing more and more confused.

“What is it, then? You need not be afraid to tell me, surely.”

“There—there is a reason,” she said, turning as red as a rose, “but I can’t mention it just now. Some day perhaps you shall know.” And with this she was gone.

He smiled. A feeling of exultation took possession of him. He thought he understood the workings of her mind. She was proud, and did not like placing herself under an obligation. He approved of her independent spirit. In her place, he told himself, he should have acted the same. After Lady De Fochsey’s insinuations, had she appeared the least eager to attract, or anxious to get what she could out of him, then his respect and his admiration would have received a blow. As it was, he believed in her thoroughly. With that

face, and those eyes, she could not be anything but pure and innocent. Evidently, she did not realize as yet how much in earnest he was. That was quite clear.

But it would be very, very pleasant to his feelings, teaching her gradually, and from day to day, to rely upon him, to look up to him as her natural stay and support, until at last she fully understood that all he had in the world, himself, his house, his horses, his fortune, were hers, to do exactly what she liked with.

Since Mrs. Lankester had as good as told him there were no other candidates in the field, he had begun to think that in time he could persuade Dot, dear, darling, plucky little Dot, to care for him as he cared for her. Only he must not attempt to hurry her. He had seen the mistake of being too precipitate. And so he went home, and sat thinking of his love all the evening, recalling her looks and words, and

counting the days till the Morbey-Anstead steeplechases.

That had been a happy thought of his, taking the Lankesters; for even if the doctor could not get away from his professional duties he felt pretty sure he might count on Mrs. Lankester. And for Dot's sake he would have put up with half-a-dozen stout, elderly mothers, and paid them assiduous attention, however much they repelled him secretly.

By which it will be seen how hopelessly in love he was, and how far this earthly passion had separated him from his spiritual affinity in the shape of Lady de Fochsey.

The fair widow revenged herself by riding home with Lord Littelbrane, and gauging that nobleman's psychological aptitudes, as a consolation for previous disappointments.

But though she applied various test

conditions, she failed to discover that he possessed any mediumistic qualities. Not only was his lordship *not* magnetic, but worse still, during a seven mile ride, which presented numberless openings, he proved himself to be slow, wanting in dash, and insufferably commonplace.

As for his theories and prosy platitudes, she was sick to death of them already.

But for all that, she thought it would prove a splendid punishment for Mr. Jarrett if she became Lady Littelbrane, and ignored his existence ever after.

Her ideas were not exactly high in spite of dear Monsieur Adolphe's tuition.

CHAPTER V.

A FASHIONABLE STEEPLECHASE MEETING.

THE Morbey-Anstead steeplechases had for many years past been held on a level piece of ground, the property of Lord Littelbrane, situated only about three miles distant from the town of Stiffton, and known by the name of Stiffton Flats. It was intersected by a running stream which meandered through rich, grassy meadows, and which, during wet weather frequently overflowed its banks. This brook, slightly widened, and the take-off side guarded by an artificial fence, had to be jumped twice by those horses that took part in the races.

Looked at from the point of view of a pedestrian, the course was a very fair one. From first to last it did not present a single

obstacle such as might not be jumped with hounds every time they ran hard. It was nearly all grass, and beautifully level, save for a slight ascent at the finish. Yet those who knew Stiffton Flats well, and were in the habit of riding over them year after year, were unanimous in the opinion that more horses came to grief there, or else failed to get round the course, than at almost any other hunt meeting in the kingdom.

Neither was the reason far to find.

Had the Morbey Anstead steeplechases come off in the spring, or during a period of drought, no country could possibly have been more delightful. But who can count on a cessation of rain during the months of November and December? It required only a comparatively small amount of moisture to render those flat, low-lying pastures extending on either side of Skelton brook sticky and holding beyond

conception. After a few sharp showers the water was wont to lie about in pools in the furrows, where it was no uncommon thing for it to remain the greater part of the winter.

Horses and riders knew from bitter experience the detaining properties of that stiff clay soil ; but to the uninitiated all seemed fair, flat and green. Sportsmen from afar laughed at the fences, and declared emphatically that they would not mind a bit riding over them themselves ; but they generally altered their tone before the day was over, and they saw how much “grief” was caused by these same innocent-looking jumps, more especially after the first two miles were left behind.

Amateur jockeys, busy galloping and preparing their horses, had prayed for fine weather for days past ; but as usual it had been a week of “depressions.” Driving rain and boisterous winds came sweeping across

the Atlantic, until at last the heavy weights, looking in despair at the sodden state of the ground, prophesied with melancholy prescience that they might just as well keep their horses in their stables, instead of exposing them to ignominious defeat.

But however bad the weather, not to be present at the county steeplechases was a departure from Morbey Anstead manners and customs, of which no one dreamt seriously for a second.

In truth, this long established meeting was a most popular one with all classes of society. Invariably fixed to take place on a non-hunting day, it was patronized not only by the Mutual Adorationites, but also by the Quornites, men from the Cottesmore and the Belvoir, and even by followers of the more distant Pytchley, Atherstone, and North Warwickshire hunts.

It was in short, a social gathering of hunting people, who assembled from all

parts of the midland counties. Fashionable Melton was well represented, and sent forth numerous well-known members of the aristocracy, including a foreign prince, an English duke and a whole host of minor celebrities. From every country house within a radius of many miles there issued beautiful women, big of bust and small of waist (by the way, how is the combination produced so frequently on horseback?), clad in the tightest of Höhne and Busvine habits, the smartest and most fanciful of vests, and the most diversified and eccentric of hats. Some went in for low crowns, some high—very high, and with a perfectly marvellous nap. Some wore wide brims, some narrow, but *when stylish*, they were nearly always a few sizes too small for the owner's head, and were jauntily perched a top of a lovely blonde or dark fringe, as the case might be, and then kept on by a cleverly pinned

veil whose black spots lent lustre to the complexion, making soft cheeks softer and large eyes larger.

Amongst these fair equestriennes, however, could be seen specimens of a totally different type of sportswoman, though it must be owned that they were in the minority. The strong-minded ladies, who hunted their five or six days a week as regularly as men, were evidently indifferent to appearances. They could be distinguished by rusty skirts that had already done much service, by loosely-flapping covert coats, opening in front over a horse-cloth or bird's-eye waistcoat, by worsted gloves, old roomy boots, tightly-plaited hair (no fringes) and pot hats.

They went in exclusively for comfort, not fashion or show ; and if the day turned out wet, proved their sense ; but on the other hand, if Phœbus shone brightly and condescended to light up the scene

with his golden rays, then it must be confessed that they did not appear to advantage beside their smarter and nattier sisters. As for the lords of creation they displayed so many marvellous checks that one wondered at the ingenuity of the human brain to produce such astonishing combinations. Tall men wore little checks, and small men wore big ones—the biggest they could find—and strutted about like bantam cocks, trying, since nature had been unkind, to make themselves remarkable by the clothes on their back. And they certainly succeeded, looking like miniature chess-boards, in their Scotch tweeds and heather mixtures. But as long as the *genus homo* was pleased with number one, it did not much signify, and certainly could not affect the cynical critic.

Now amongst other institutions, fashion—that powerful yet insipid goddess—had elected that at the Morbey Anstead steeple-

chases it was “the thing” to ride, not drive. Consequently very few vehicles were to be seen in comparison with other race-meetings.

Not more than a dozen filled the stewards’ inclosure as a rule, and the majority of these were occupied by elderly ladies, whose riding days and figures were both gone, and who amused themselves by watching through their field-glasses, who was the strange young man riding with dear Anna Maria or sweet Susan Jane.

By the younger members of the community, both male and female, it was considered “chalk” to drive, though if questioned as to the reason, it is open to doubt if anybody could have given one. As far as seeing the races themselves went, those occupying elevated box-seats possessed a decided advantage over their equestrian brethren.

In the one case, you could sit comfort-

ably with a rug round your legs, your card in your left hand, and your field-glass in your right, and take uninterrupted stock of the company and the proceedings in general. But in the other, you first had to contend with a fidgetty horse—why is even the quietest animal ever foaled fractious on such occasions? — then gallop madly down to the water-jump, by which you lost the start, then as madly back to the winning-post, where you arrived just too late to see the finish, and had not an idea how the race had been run, or what had won, until you asked your neighbour, and he asked somebody else, who in turn appealed to a third party, when eventually the desired information might or might not be obtained.

Then you clapped each other on the back —figuratively speaking, of course; it would have been vulgar to do so in reality—and exclaimed, “ Ha, ha, capital race, capital

finish. There's no doubt that riding is the only way to enjoy a steeplechase. That's the beauty of this meeting. You see such a lot."

As a matter of fact, whether you did, or whether you didn't, signified very little, when once fashion had dictated that you were to prance about the course on high-mettled hacks and display your figure and your equitation to the public at large. It was "the thing." What need to analyze whether you were comfortable or uncomfortable, at your ease or the reverse? There are no such willing slaves as English people, nor any other race with such sheep-like propensities. If one bondsman bends his neck to the yoke, then all must needs do the same.

It is possible that had Bob been thoroughly acquainted with Stiffton Flat habits, he too would have yielded his independence and ridden instead of driven to

the races. But being new to the mother country's ways he ordered out his deceased uncle's big, roomy omnibus, piled the roof up with brown, straw-lined hampers containing good things to eat and to drink, seated himself inside and drove off to fetch the Lankesters, without having the least suspicion how greatly he was violating Morbey Anstead manners and customs.

It had several times occurred to our hero that if only Doctor Lankester would walk about the course when they arrived, which with his sporting tastes he was sure to do, and if only the old lady would elect to remain within the four sheltering walls of the omnibus, he and Dot might occupy the box-seat and have an uncommonly good time of it. This was how the artful fellow reasoned.

Just as he started the sun shone out, and caused patches of clear blue sky to break

up the heavy masses of dark grey cloud that almost filled the heavens ; but in spite of its cheering influence, he did not feel thoroughly happy until he had made quite sure of his guests, and Dot, looking very pretty and pleasant, was seated by his side, whilst Doctor and Mrs. Lankester occupied the seat opposite.

The latter lady was magnificently and carefully attired for the occasion. She wore a purple silk dress, a Paisley shawl, and a bonnet which would have put many a garden to shame, so crowded was it with gay and many-coloured flowers, mounted on green india-rubber stalks, which kept bobbing about with each movement of the wearer's head. Every time she looked at Bob and Dot she smiled encouragingly at them, and in a way which, to the girl at least, was peculiarly irritating.

She was terrified lest Mr. Jarrett should discover the meaning of those bland nods

and maternal grimaces, which seemed to her quite shamefully apparent.

So they drove on, along the country roads, past villages and homesteads, and through the flourishing little town of Stiffton, with its tortuous, old-fashioned streets, well-to-do inns, prospering shops, and venerable church, up whose grey walls the ivy clung, and whose square tower formed a landmark for miles around. A clean, bustling little town, full of life and animation on this particular morning, as flies rattled past from the railway station, and huge open conveyances offered to deposit pedestrians on the course for the modest sum of fourpence a-head. Before the hotels paced ready-saddled horses, waiting for their riders to appear, and behind each curtained window peeped out the innocent faces of little children, and the more curious ones of their mothers or nurses.

Such was Stiffton. As good a specimen as you could meet with of a thriving hunting town. Such sleek, fat tradesmen, and such innumerable villas nestling on every height, told a tale of prosperity, rare in this our nineteenth century.

When Bob's omnibus neared the entry to the race-course, a little delay occurred, owing to his not being possessed of an inclosure ticket. To tell the truth, he had never given the matter a thought.

But Mrs. Lankester was quite put out at the discovery. She had set her heart on being among what she styled "the nobs."

"Do you mean to say, Mr. Jarrett, that you actually have not got a ticket?" she asked with considerable asperity, too bad an actress to conceal her displeasure.

"No," he replied, "I am sorry to say I have not."

"Why on earth did you not ask for one?"

“For the very simple reason, Mrs. Lankester, that I did not know who to ask. Besides,” throwing back his head with an independent gesture, “I hate begging for favours.”

“Quite right,” murmured Dot sympathetically.

“Pooh! Where’s the favour?” responded Mrs. Lankester in a louder key. “In your position you have a *right* to a steward’s ticket. Captain Straightem always had one, that I know for a fact.”

“Very probably, but then he was a resident in the county, whereas I am a new comer, and moreover have had nothing to do with the races.”

“You’d better let us in,” said Mrs. Lankester persuasively, trying the effect of an appeal to the man at the gate. “This is Mr. Jarrett—Captain Straightem’s nephew. Nobody will say anything, I’m sure.”

Anxious to conciliate as far as lay in his

power, the man turned to Lord Littelbrane, who at this juncture appeared on the scene, accompanied by General Prosieboy and another Mutual Adorationite, one Captain Greenby by name.

Before Bob could prevent him, he went up to the noble proprietor of the course, doubtless thinking to curry favour with both parties.

“Beg pardon, my lord,” he said, touching his hat respectfully, “but will you kindly furnish me with instructions? I am at a loss how to act.”

“Why, what’s wrong, Parkins?” returned his lordship in surprise. “You have your orders.”

“Yes, my lord, but I fear there has been some mistake. It appears that Mr. Jarrett, of Straightem Court, has not been provided with an inclosure ticket.”

“Well, what of that? Why the dickens should he be?”

“Am I to let him in, or not?”

“No, certainly not,” thundered his lordship in reply. “I’m surprised at you, Parkins. I should have thought after all these years you would have known your business better than to come to me with such a demand. The King of England himself should not go inside our county inclosure without a ticket.”

Whereupon he gave his horse an angry touch of the heel, and moved on.

“The idea!” he exclaimed, turning indignantly to his companions, “of having that low fellow in among us. Why it’s enough to put one off one’s day’s amusement altogether.”

General Prosieboy and Captain Greenby both assented, though the former mumbled vaguely that he wondered where the deuce they were going to get luncheon, and wished inwardly that Lord Littelbrane had had the sense to follow Mr. Jarrett’s example,

and bring plenty of food, in a comfortable shut-up trap, rather than depend upon the hospitality of his neighbours, which might or might not be forthcoming at the requisite moment. Meals ought not to be trifled with, in General Prosieboy's estimation. They were important things, and if you were docked of one, it was a serious loss. Had he been quite sure where and with whom he was going to lunch, he should have felt easier decidedly in his mind. But he had a distinct recollection of being invited to refresh his inner-man on a former occasion by a noble earl, who offered him nothing more substantial than a packet of dry sandwiches, and who *folded up the paper and string* when he had finished this light repast, and then, in order to assuage his thirst, politely tendered him half a glass of sherry, doled out from a pocket flask. That luncheon was still green in the general's memory, and even now gave him

the shudders when he recalled it. The mere sight of Bob's well-filled hamper inflamed him with gastronomic longings.

But he was far too much of a sycophant to express his real sentiments, especially when he felt pretty certain that they would not meet with a favourable reception, so resolutely averting his eyes from that highly-laden omnibus roof, he burst into a forced laugh and said :

“I wonder what the devil that fellow Jarrett means by coming to our Morbey Anstead races in this tinkering style. Surely he has horses enough in his stable to be able to pull one out on an occasion like the present.”

“Perhaps he thinks a four-wheeled conveyance safer than pony-back,” suggested Captain Greenby, who with stiffly waxed moustache and squared elbows was riding a sprightly little hog-maned animal, only a few sizes larger than a full-grown donkey.

“ No, I’ll give the man his due. He ain’t afraid,” chimed in Lord Littelbrane, whose sense of justice, though extremely limited, was strong. “ He can’t ride one little bit—rolls about all over the place, and is nearly off at every fence, but he has got the pluck of the old gentleman himself.”

“ Pshaw ! He’ll soon come back, he’ll soon come back to the level of the rest of ‘em,” murmured General Prosieboy disparagingly. “ Nobody ever keeps the ball a-rolling for more than a season or two in this country, and the harder they go at first, the sooner they collapse as a rule. Look at ‘Crashing Jimmy,’ ” naming a well-known member of the hunt ; “ the very sight of a fence settles him nowadays, and yet what a bruiser he was at one time.”

Meantime Bob had succeeded in finding a place for his carriage just outside, though not within, the magic ropes which separated the *élite* of half-a-dozen hunts

from the so-called “outsiders.” The winning-post was not twenty yards off. The omnibus faced the rails, and as he and Dot did not trouble themselves much about social distinctions, and certainly did not allow them to interfere with their pleasure, they were perfectly satisfied. Not so Mrs. Lankester.

As already seen, in coming to the races under Mr. Jarrett’s sheltering wing she had imagined she should have a place amongst the regular county people. She had pictured to herself the delight of being able to nod triumphantly to her friends and acquaintances from the superior altitude of the stewards’ inclosure. The reality was a bitter disappointment, and she could not refrain from venting her displeasure upon Bob.

“Really, Mr. Jarrett,” she said, speaking in acrid tones, “I must say that I don’t think you have managed matters at all well.”

Bob winced. His mamma-in-law was beginning to assert her rights a little soon.

“Indeed, Mrs. Lankester. I am sorry you should be of such an opinion.”

“No, not at all well,” she continued. “For what’s the use of living in a great big house, and having ever so much money, if you go and stick yourself down among a parcel of nobodies, instead of being with the swells, as you ought to be. I call it downright foolish.”

“Oh, mamma, don’t — please don’t,” gasped Dot piteously, her face suddenly turning the colour of a peony. “Mr. Jarrett has been so kind, and surely, *surely* it is not for us to find fault. Why, we should not be here at all were it not for him.”

His heart went out towards her. He would have given anything to kiss her sweet, eloquent lips.

“Never mind, Miss Dot,” he said, looking at her with a reassuring smile.

“ No doubt Mrs. Lankester is quite right in what she says. She must forgive my blundering for once, and next year, if we are all alive and well, I hope she may have the satisfaction of seeing us in the inclosure, where, according to her opinion, we ought to be now.”

That one little word “ *us* ” restored Mrs. Lankester’s good humour as by a miracle. For, she argued, Mr. Jarrett might so very easily have said “ *me*. ” But “ *us* ” was comprehensive and significant in the extreme ; it meant your daughter and I and a happy family party. At all events, she would do all she could to promote the match. So the cross, dissatisfied expression vanished from her face, and she said very winningly :

“ I hope so also. And now, Mr. Jarrett, don’t you think that you and Dot had better go and have a look at the fences before the races begin ? Doctor Lankester has been gone some time.”

“Won’t you come, too, mother?” said her daughter, detecting a maternal artifice, and resenting it accordingly, for had she not received a long lecture on the advantages of matrimony previous to starting?

The green stalks, with their burden of artificial flowers, waved backwards and forwards dissentingly.

“No, dearest, I am far too afraid of getting my feet wet.”

“Then I’ll stop with you, mother.”

“Oh, dear no! Never mind me, child. I’m accustomed to being left alone. Mr. Jarrett, carry her off; but oh, Dot, before you go, just take one look at old Lady Fraserburgh’s bonnet. Did you ever see such a thing? It’s not fit for a housemaid. There is not a single flower or feather upon it, and they tell me that flowers, especially, are all the rage nowadays.”

Dot and Bob walked off together. The girl went reluctantly, but she dared not

offer any opposition for fear of rendering her mother's scheming too apparent. Nevertheless, in her heart of hearts she felt bitterly ashamed. It was such a horrible, humiliating thing for any modest-minded young woman to be thrown at a man's head in this barefaced fashion ; and the more you liked the man, the more you respected and esteemed him, the worse it was.

What, too, could be more awful than having to blush for your own mother ? All Dot's sense of ladyhood had been already shocked repeatedly. But to show her distress in any way was only to make matters worse. So, with a sobered manner, and most of her pleasure gone for the day, she walked by her companion's side, striving hard to conceal how greatly she was vexed and annoyed by Mrs. Lankester's remarks.

CHAPTER VI.

AN AMATEUR FINISH.

A FINE, sympathetic insight seemed to have revealed to Bob that Mrs. Lankester had contrived to put Dot out, therefore he sedulously avoided the subject of the inclosure ticket, and did all he could to restore her serenity. He behaved very well indeed, more like an elder brother than an admirer, and did not attempt to pay her a single compliment, or to make one flowery speech.

The girl was grateful, and appreciated the delicacy of his conduct. As a proof, she exerted herself to amuse, and, as they walked down the course, pointed him out a few of the celebrities she knew by sight, who, of course, were unknown to Bob.

“ Do you see that handsome middle-aged woman on the black horse ? ” she exclaimed, as a buxom lady of some eight and thirty summers passed by, laughing and chatting to her male attendant.

“ Yes, who is she ? ”

“ She is Mrs. Long-Langley, a siren who is said to have broken more hearts than any woman in England, and who even now, though no longer as young as she was, contrives to captivate every man she comes across.”

“ Either the men must be very weak, or their hearts remarkably brittle,” answered Bob, for, in his present love-lorn condition, he had eyes but for one. “ I don’t see anything in her at all.”

“ Don’t you ? Then you are an exception to the rule, since her admirers are legion. The gentleman riding by her side—the stout one, I mean, in the frock coat—is the Duke of Breezycourt. It is said that he

would marry Mrs. Long-Langley to-morrow, if Mr. Long-Langley were out of the way."

"Why, she looks old enough to be his mother," exclaimed Bob, taking another look at the captivating equestrienne. "I would as soon fall in love with my grandmother. What *can* constitute the attraction?"

Dot laughed. Even the nicest of women is not displeased at hearing one of her own sex disparaged, at least where appearances are concerned. There is a natural rivalry amongst them.

"You are evidently less susceptible than the Stifftonians, Mr. Jarrett. But people who know Mrs. Long-Langley intimately, declare that she possesses a most wonderfully fascinating manner. And now I want you to look at somebody else—somebody who, personally, I admire infinitely more."

"And who might that be?" inquired

Bob. “ I am curious to learn your taste at any rate.”

“ Turn to the left, then, and you will see Lady Norman just coming on the course, driving a pair of wonderful bay horses. Make haste, or she will have pulled up. There ! ” as Bob’s eyes roved in the desired direction, “ did you ever see such steppers ? It is a pleasure to watch them move.”

“ They are magnificent, certainly. But who is this Lady Norman ? Has she a history also ? ”

“ Yes, but it is a very sad one. Her husband is mad—not mad enough to be shut up, but he does the most extraordinary things, and takes the funniest fancies into his head. One is, that he is always falling in love with actresses and queer sort of people, which, of course,” said Dot innocently, “ must be very distressing to Lady Norman. But she behaves like an angel,

and forgives all his escapades. People say that she loves him in spite of everything, and that her life is miserable in consequence. Poor thing! I am sorry for her."

Bob's interest was aroused. He withdrew his eyes from the spirited bay horses, and looked at their driver. He saw an extremely beautiful, calm, sad face, whose look of settled melancholy touched his heart. It was easy, even for a stranger like himself, to tell that Lady Norman was far from being a happy woman.

Thus time passed away, and both Dot and Bob were so interested in all they perceived going on around them, that they were quite astonished when the jockeys, wearing silk caps and jackets, began to appear in the paddock, and commenced making preparations for mounting their respective steeds.

This was a signal that the first race

would shortly be run, therefore the two young people made the best of their way back to the omnibus, where they found Mrs. Lankester still busily inspecting old Lady Fraserburgh's bonnet, through an ivory opera-glass grown yellow with age.

“I never was more disappointed in my life, Dot,” she murmured in her daughter's ear. “I thought to see such a fine show of bonnets, and really, there ain't one to compare with mine.” Then she profited by Bob's turning to give a few words of direction to his man, and added eagerly, “Well, how have you been getting on?” Dot was thankful to escape the necessity of replying, owing to Mr. Jarrett's suddenly asking her mother at what time she would like luncheon, which, fortunately, diverted her attention.

“Won't you come outside, Mrs. Lankester?” he inquired, when this important matter had been settled.

“No, thank you, Mr. Jarrett, I’m afraid of the cold air. But make Dot go. She loves to see the races, and to tell the honest truth, I don’t much care about them one way or the other.”

Dot was rapidly gaining confidence in Bob ; his conduct was so delicate ; besides, she began to feel that she would rather be alone with him any number of hours than sit and listen to her mother’s speeches ; they were so very, very trying, and irritated her so fearfully.

Both pride and shame were roused by turns. Therefore she scrambled up on to the box seat, and Bob seated himself by her side, but before many minutes had passed Dr. Lankester joined them, puffing a little, from the pace at which he had walked. “They are making Albatross favourite,” he said, “but the course is awfully heavy, and, in my opinion, he won’t stay home when the

pinch comes. He's too slack in the loins for my taste."

"What do you fancy, papa?" asked Dot. "You generally manage to select the winners."

"Well, I've got a sneaking liking for Dauntless. He may not show quite so much quality as Albatross, but for all that he's a real good stamp of hunter and the public have had the sense to make him second favourite."

"Have you backed him, doctor?" inquired Bob, who had not cared to leave his companion in order to visit the betting ring. Moments spent alone with Dot were far too precious to be thus wasted.

"Only for five shillings, just to give me a little interest in the race. I never invest large sums. Firstly, because I can't afford it, and secondly, because one's bound to lose in the long run."

As he finished speaking, the six compe-

titors who were to take part in the race came trotting down the course and went some two or three hundred yards. Then, turning sharp round, they cantered back again at half speed, the bright jackets of the jockeys flashing past like meteors, and for a second bewildering the eye. Even to the uninitiated, it was clear that Captain Greenby's Albatross was the gentleman of the party. But he was an aged horse, and carried the top weight, having, in years past, won over the very same course, in consequence of which he had to put up with a penalty of seven pounds. A horse might be ever so good, and yet fail to catch the judge's eye with twelve stone thirteen on his back, especially when the "going" was as bad as to-day. The hypercritical, too, took exception to Albatross's feet, which were remarkably small and almost asinine in conformation, whereas Dauntless's broad hoofs seemed

more calculated to cope with the mud and the clay. He was of a bigger, stouter make altogether, and, being only five years of age, his impost was but eleven stone twelve. Thus there was exactly fifteen pounds difference between the two horses ; a difference which many of the knowing ones thought fatal.

But Captain Greenby, who rode Albatross himself, was extremely confident of winning, and advised all his friends to back his mount, in spite of the gallant grey having to carry lumps of weight in comparison with every other animal in the race. Mayfly, Sir Roger, Gamecock and Kildare were youngsters, who had yet to win their laurels between the flags. Kildare, in particular, came with a high reputation from over the water, and was a son of Solon on the sire's side, and of old Camilla on the dam's. But beyond that he had been seen to give his owner

a couple of nasty rolls out hunting, when first he appeared at covert side, nothing much was known of him. Still, he had the makings of a good horse.

At length the flag was dropped to an excellent start, and the six competitors all cleared the first fence in beautiful order, skimming over it without touching a twig. It was a pretty sight to see one after the other take off exactly right, and land as lightly as a cat. Neither did the second obstacle produce “grief.” On streamed the noble animals, until they neared the water-jump, which, although of no very formidable dimensions, caused Mayfly to refuse.

She whipped round so sharply that her jockey was within an ace of flying over her head, an action which he greatly resented. Again and again he drove her at the brook with a vigour and a persistence both highly creditable, but nevertheless,

quite ineffectual. Mayfly laid back her ears, and swerved before she came within yards of that obnoxious streamlet.

The spectators, meantime, had been so much interested by the contest going on between man and horse, that they had almost forgotten the race itself, especially as the five remaining horses had disappeared into the distant country.

When they again could be seen the pace and the heavy ground were already telling their tale. Only Dauntless, Albatross and Gamecock remained to the fore. Kildare had either fallen, or else been pulled up, when his rider perceived that his chance was hopeless, and Sir Roger, though he still plodded wearily on in the rear, was almost half a field behind the leaders, whose girths he stood but little chance of reaching, unless all three failed to keep upright.

A hundred yards more and it became

evident that Gamecock's bolt was shot, and that the issue lay between the two favourites, Albatross and Dauntless. The former struggled nobly under his heavy impost, but both horses were dead beat, and there seemed little, if anything, to choose between them. And now a most singular scene took place, and one such as might not be witnessed in a lifetime; in fact, it required to be *seen* to be *believed*.

On, on they came with heavy labouring stride. Dauntless was first on to the race course. But he was so done, that after brushing through the last fence, he stood stock still for a few seconds on landing. This conduct on his part enabled Albatross to gain an advantage.

But he, in his turn, was equally exhausted, and he could hardly raise a canter. Mad with emulation and disappointment, the rider of Dauntless, by whip and spur,

set him going again. That brief halt, short as it was, had enabled the poor horse to get a whiff of fresh air. It served him in good stead now, and probably turned the balance in his favour. He began to make up for lost ground.

Albatross's jockey made a vigorous call. Then he committed that great mistake of nine amateur riders out of ten, and attempted to use his whip. As he raised his hand aloft, the horse stopped to nothing, and within half-a-dozen strides of the winning post Dauntless overhauled his opponent, and by a desperate effort managed to secure the judge's fiat by a short neck.

Two seconds afterwards, and both horses relapsed voluntarily into a walk, and from a walk to a stand. Even when they had sufficiently recovered to move leisurely towards the paddock, a veritable cloud of steam enveloped them, which issued from

their nostrils in spasmotic streams, and robbed the precious air of half its freshness. Great drops of perspiration rolled down from their foreheads to the ground, and their outstretched necks and heaving flanks warned those who were destined to follow in their footsteps what they might expect. Albatross had run a good game horse, and though beaten be was not disgraced ; but when his master dismounted, he asked himself somewhat ruefully, whether the race repaid him for having taken so much out of his mount, and whether he might not *just* have won it had some kind freak of fortune deprived him of his whip.

Meantime, so great had been the excitement occasioned by this uncommon *finale*, that nobody paid much attention to the weather. But that vast host of smart gentlemen and ladies on horseback were all at once disagreeably forced to take it into their con-

sideration. The sky became overcast, the sun—which had shone fitfully throughout the morning—disappeared sullenly behind a spreading mass of leaden cloud, and presently a few great drops of rain caused the wary to cast an anxious eye around in search of shelter. The wind, too, arose, and whistled and howled through the hedge-rows and the tops of the trees, until it sounded like angry waves dashing themselves against the sea-shore, and then receding with a baffled roar.

As previously mentioned, the truly fashionable throng had come to the races in gala array, determined to spend a long and happy day, and had no convenient carriages to retire to in case of an emergency like the present. Darker and darker grew the clouds, until at last down came the rain with merciless severity. There is rain and rain. A mild steady dribble is nothing when contrasted with a chilly

torrent, that cuts the very skin on your cheeks and freezes the marrow in your bones.

The rain which now descended was of this latter character—fierce, cold, penetrating to a degree. Horses refused to face it, and turning round with one accord, stood with their backs to the bitter wind, presenting a row of trembling quarters and tucked-in tails.

In five minutes every one was more or less wet through. Even treble Melton could not stand it. The ladies conducted themselves bravely, as they always do on such occasions, but all the same they looked thoroughly unhappy in their light and saturated habits, which outlined each fair form with the clinging austerity of a bathing-gown.

Those people who are in the habit of patronizing local meetings, where covered stands are all but unknown, and carriages

or tents offer the only refuge in bad weather, will appreciate the difference produced in a few minutes by sunshine or storm. On Stiffton Flats, one short quarter of an hour ago, all was bright and gay. The ladies and gentlemen on horseback, in their smart clothes and glossy hats, galloped briskly up and down, and lent animation to the scene. Gipsy women prowled from carriage to carriage, and made themselves generally objectionable, red-coated runners, accustomed to hunt on foot with the various packs, strove to gain a few honest pence by selling race-cards, negroes sang, acrobats tumbled, Aunt Sally and the three-card trick drove a lively trade, oranges and cocoanuts were freely disposed of, as also were sticks of coloured rock and gingerbread nuts. Bookmakers shouted out the odds until they were hoarse, jockeys enveloped in covert coats, with their silk caps looking like bright dots in

the crowd, wound their way through the multitude, and in the paddock, dainty, sleek-coated horses walked leisurely around, or else lashed out impatiently at their too ardent admirers, until they forced them to keep at a respectable distance from their nimble heels.

All was life, bustle, movement and good-humour.

Now, a ghastly change had come over the scene. One could hardly realize it was the same. The racecourse was black with dripping umbrellas, that resembled so many overgrown mushrooms turned mouldy by decay. What carriages there were were mostly open, and presented a similar spectacle, slightly diversified by waterproof rugs ; whilst as for the aristocratic throng on horseback—the flower of half-a-dozen hunting fields—the male and female “mashers” of Stiffton and all the surrounding country, if ever people looked

thoroughly wretched, miserable and uncomfortable, they did. The rain had taken all the pride out of them. Their glory had departed, at all events for that day ; and they stood revealed as mere ordinary human beings, neither better nor worse than their neighbours, when shorn of all the pomp and majesty of purple and fine linen. Even a Stifftonian cannot rise superior to crumpled collars and a limp shirt front. Our washerwoman has a great deal to do with producing the semblance of a gentleman.



CHAPTER VII.

“I WOULD GIVE MY LIFE TO SERVE YOU.”

To make matters worse, the rain came on exactly at two o'clock, when an hour had been allowed between the first and second races for luncheon. Everyone felt more or less hungry. But how were folk to eat, drink and make merry when it was pouring down in buckets, sending horrible, cold driplets from the brim of your hat along your spine, reducing your linen to a pulp and coursing from the tip of your nose like a water-spout?

A few wise people galloped off home without more ado, but the majority, having arranged for a day's pleasuring, were obliged to wait until the bitter end. Trains

ran inconveniently, and specials were not to be obtained until quite late in the afternoon, when all the fun was supposed to be over. But what fun? The good-natured and cheerful optimist, though ill at ease bodily, prognosticated that the weather was sure to mend shortly, since it was quite too bad to last. The pessimist growled back in reply, that he didn't care a hang whether it did or whether it didn't, since he was wet through already and could not possibly be in a worse plight.

In short, folk were full of compassion for themselves; so full, that they had little to spare for the poor horses, who cowered and winced before the fierce blast in a truly pitiable manner, their glossy coats stained dark by the wet, which trickled down in large drops from every part.

While all this was going on without, many were the envious glances cast at that snug little quartette seated comfortably

inside Mr. Jarrett's capacious omnibus, discussing a whole row of good things spread out appetizingly on the cushions. Even Mrs. Lankester's attention was completely diverted for the time being from her neighbour's bonnet to Bob's champagne, which she appeared highly to relish, judging from the number of times she plied her glass and allowed it to be filled without remonstrance. The strings of her tongue became gradually unloosened, and her company manners were laid aside.

"Now, I call this jolly!" she exclaimed, smacking her fat lips, and smiling unctuously at Bob. Eh? What do you say, Mr. Jarrett? though I needn't ask, for you and that girl of mine look as happy as sand-boys."

Dot almost hid her face in her plate. But Bob could see her little pink ear grow pinker and felt for her distress. He foresaw

that his mother-in-law was likely to prove a thorn in the flesh.

“Thank you, Mrs. Lankester,” he rejoined composedly. “I’m pretty comfortable. One always does feel better when one has had something to eat and drink.”

“Just so, just so. Your champagne is capital for keeping out the cold. That’s why I’m taking a little extra.”

“Have a drop more, then,” and Bob poured out another bumper.

Mrs. Lankester sipped it with relish.

“Lor ! how miserable the swells look ! ” she ejaculated triumphantly, giving a coarse laugh of content as the Duke of Breezycourt and Mrs. Long-Langley rode by, wearing much the same appearance as if they had stood under a pump and been well soused.

“I wish I could take them all in,” said kind-hearted Bob. “I feel so sorry for the poor ladies.”

"I'm very glad you can't, Mr. Jarrett. They would not let us into their inclosure when we wanted, and now we score over them. That's as it should be."

"I should not like to have you for an enemy, Mrs. Lankester."

"Oh! no fear, you never will. On the contrary," looking significantly at Dot, "I am in hopes that we may be the best friends later on. By-the-way, do you admire Mrs. Long-Langley?"

"No, not particularly. She has the remains of a fine woman, but art has been too evidently employed to preserve them."

"That's just what I say. I can't see any beauty in her whatever."

"You forget, my dear," interposed Doctor Lankester with his genial smile, "that good looks are apt to be effaced when exposed to such a downpour. Where is the carmine of those lovely cheeks? Where the straight and pencilled brow, the ruddy

lip and golden locks? Faded and gone, or if not quite gone, at all events converted into little coloured rivulets that scarcely heighten the general appearance."

Bob laughed heartily.

"Why, doctor!" he exclaimed in a bantering tone, "I had no idea you were so cynical."

"If there is one thing on the face of the earth I detest, it is a painted woman. She is such a horrid, vile, false sham."

"There I am with you," answered Bob. "Try a glass of that claret. I can recommend it as being something extra good; or do you prefer port?"

Whilst they were doing full justice to the viands spread out before them, and waxing merrier and more colloquial as the bottles grew empty, Bob suddenly saw a sight which roused him to compassion.

With their backs turned towards the quarter from whence the wind came, and

almost facing the omnibus, he spied Lord Littelbrane and General Prosieboy standing in dismal silence side by side.

Who can describe the wretched appearance presented by these two unfortunate gentlemen, but more especially by the elder one, who, owing to his advanced years, was highly susceptible to the cold and the wet. With collar turned up, hat crammed down, shoulders shrugged, and head bent forward on his chest, his venerable beard transformed into a variety of little water-spouts which coursed down his clothes, and with his red old face positively purple from exposure, there sat General Prosieboy—a miserable object indeed. Bob's kind heart melted on the spot. He was not one to harbour malice, and he forgot that this man was his enemy, and had insulted him in every possible way. He remembered only that he was a human being, past the prime of life, and at the present moment

evidently suffered from keen physical discomfort. “Do as thou wouldst be done by.” This was what flashed through his mind.

In an instant he had left the omnibus, and was battling his way through the driving rain and slipping about on the saturated soil as he vainly strove to make haste.

“Get off! get off!” he said hurriedly. “You must be simply perished. Come into my 'bus and have a bit of something to eat and a glass or two of liquor to warm you up. Here, my man,” addressing a half-starved looking individual, who stood prowling about, evidently in search of a job, “hold this gentleman's horse.”

Oh, what a heavenly invitation!

For an instant the general thought it was an angel's voice sounding so sweetly in his ears. The next, he looked round and saw the man he had called a duffer and an out-

sider, a rank bounder, and every vituperative name in his vocabulary, standing close beside him, gazing up into his face with a pair of compassionate brown eyes, so clear and honest that they seemed as if they knew no guile.

To do General Prosieboy justice, as their glances met he felt thoroughly ashamed of himself. Here was an enemy prepared to heap coals of fire upon his head. He positively yearned to accept Bob's timely and hospitable offer, but if he did so the sacrifice would be immense, for how could he continue to abuse him hereafter? Even he, was not quite mean enough for that.

But he was scarcely a free agent. If he followed his inclinations and profited by Mr. Jarrett's invitation, what would Lord Littlebrane say? There lay the difficulty, which was greatly increased by his companion's presence. Should he be upbraided and condemned as a base seceder from the

ranks of the Mutual Adorationites? Would he be branded as a traitor to his order, a turncoat and a renegade?

He glanced uneasily at his lordship, who maintained an impenetrable front, and whose countenance was as impassive as a mask. He could glean nothing from its stolidly frigid expression.

Just then a furious gust of wind and rain combined, almost carried their horses off their legs, and caused them to sidle up against the coach of the —— Lancers, a regiment whose existence Lord Littelbrane had seen fit to ignore, and had never called on. A regular rivulet ran off the roof, and almost swamped the unhappy horsemen.

Abject and pitiful as might be General Prosieboy's conduct, the bodily discomfort which he was enduring conquered every remaining vestige of pride. If the Devil himself had made him a similar offer he

would have accepted it at that moment, when the horrid moisture penetrated to his neck, his back, his thighs, and sent icy shivers, suggestive of rheumatism, sciatica and lumbago, through all his substantial frame.

“Thank you,” he said to Bob, dismounting as speedily as his wet clothes would permit of. “It has turned out a most miserable day, and I shall be glad to avail myself of your hospitality.”

“That’s right,” exclaimed the younger man cordially. Then in a lower tone he added, “Won’t his lordship come also? It is so very stormy and disagreeable.”

Lord Littelbrane overheard the remark, but he, at least, was consistent. In his heart of hearts he despised his friend’s weakness, and felt secretly angered by it. No amount of wet or cold should succeed in making *him* depart from his principles. Corporeal misery should not induce *him* to

quit his colours. He would stick to them through thick and thin, and at all events show a good example to this unworthy and degenerate M.A.

“No, thank you,” he said in his most lordly and stiffest manner; “I’m not so susceptible to a little rain as General Prosieboy, and prefer to remain where I am.”

Then he looked at the dripping and trembling old man with a contempt which he did not attempt to conceal, and muttered in an ill-pleased undertone, “I’m surprised at you, Squasher!”

It needed a great many glasses of Bob’s champagne, supplemented by a tumbler of stiff brandy and water, to restore that distinguished warrior’s equanimity. He felt depressed and degraded, and if it had not been for the drink, which was uncommonly good, and served without any stint, he never could have survived so

crushing a reprimand from the head of the Mutual Adorationites

But little by little, as he grew more comfortable, his dignity returned. The generous wine flowed through his veins, and chased away that disagreeable sensation of whipped hound. After all, a man might take a little luncheon with a fellow on emergency without being obliged to have much to do with him hereafter. The fellow might be dropped directly he was no longer useful, and put back into his place gently but firmly. It only required tact.

The general was a fine old man. In his cups he was apt to grow pompous, and he so far conducted himself as a M. A. that in spite of the temptations by which he was assailed, he never once condescended either to slap his host on the back, dig him in the ribs, or even to call him Jarrett, much less Bob. In fact, he addressed him as seldom

as possible, and when he did, it was always from the heights of his own superiority. His manner was both patronizing and offensive. The truth was, he was afraid to unbend for fear of incurring Lord Littlebrane's displeasure, and so fell between two stools, and conciliated neither his enemy nor his friend. Both despised him, and worse still, he despised himself, and was painfully conscious of the fact.

He sat there, eating away at Bob's pigeon pie and *pâté de foie gras*, and swallowing inconceivable quantities of his Grand Monopole and Château Lafitte, but he did not make the least effort to render any return in the way of politeness or conversation. As for the ladies they came in for little favour. But then, the Mutual Adorationites never did say much, even among themselves. It was not their way. No flow of small talk was at their command, and they kept the few ideas

they possessed far very rare and special occasions, such as when Mr. Tag-rag-and-bobtail rode over a hound, or the hunt subscriptions failed to realize the accustomed figure.

"Well," exclaimed Dot, when at last, the rain having almost ceased, General Prosieboy rode off to catch his train, after having first mumbled some very ungraceful and incoherent thanks, "it's not for me to abuse your guests, Mr. Jarrett, but of all the odious, stuck-up, disagreeable old gentlemen I ever met, I really think General Prosieboy is entitled to the prize."

"I think so too," said Bob soberly; "I can't make him out at all."

He was more vexed than he chose to admit at finding every effort of friendship on his part so steadily and rudely repulsed. For although the general had accepted his hospitality, and broken bread, so to speak, at his table, he knew quite well that he had

only done so under pressure, and remained as much his enemy as heretofore. This was discouraging in the extreme.

“I’m afraid there must be something altogether wrong about me,” he said almost tearfully to Dot, directly they found themselves together again. “Something wholly unlike other people.”

“Why, Mr. Jarrett? What on earth do you mean?”

“I don’t get on at all. Not one bit. Nobody seems to like me, try what I will,” he returned despondently.

“Don’t say that. It is not true.”

“I wish it were as you say. But even you, Miss Dot, only tolerate me.”

“No such thing, Mr. Jarrett. You are quite mistaken there.”

“Ah! I know better. You don’t care for me as I care for you.”

She blushed and remained silent. Her heart told her the accusation was true.

"I wish you would tell me where I fail," he went on, after a slight pause. "Because then"—and his voice trembled—"I might try and improve."

She felt dreadfully sorry for him, and yet was afraid to show her sorrow too plainly, for fear of setting fire to a volcano. His manner, more than his words, revealed how deeply he was moved.

"Nonsense," she said firmly. "It's those nasty, narrow-minded, empty-headed people who want improving, not you. Why," and her soft face kindled into sudden enthusiasm, "you are worth the whole lot of them put together. I should like to know how long it would have been before Lord Littelbrane or General Prosieboy asked *you* to come in out of the rain, supposing the conditions of to-day reversed. Don't vex yourself about what such people say and do, Mr. Jarrett. They do not deserve a thought, and are simply

beneath you in every way. You are a king in comparison."

It was not often Dot spoke at such length, or with so much earnestness. But she was indignant at the treatment Bob had received.

And if anything could have comforted him, her speech did. He turned two moist and grateful eyes full upon her.

"God bless you, Miss Dot," he said huskily. "I'm all right again now, for as long as you don't consider me a brute I don't care two straws what anybody else thinks."

"I—I like you awfully, and so does papa," she cried impulsively, carried out of her reserve, and trying only to console him for the slights he had received.

His face flamed into colour. His whole soul seemed for one second to flash through his eyes.

"And I like you too. You know that I do. I would give my life to serve you."

They were simple words, but the way in which he said them made the blood rush to her heart in a guilty wave. How was she ever to make him understand the difference between loving and liking, without wounding his kindly spirit? "He ought to know —he ought to know." That was what she kept telling herself during the homeward drive.



CHAPTER VIII.

BOB RECEIVES A SEVERE SHOCK.

A MONTH passed away, and at the end of it Bob was painfully conscious of the fact that, in spite of the increased intimacy existing between himself and the Lankester family, he had made but little real progress in his suit.

He and Dot were very good friends, but nothing more. He never could get any further. She was always pleasant, and when they met, which he contrived should be often, appeared pleased to see him ; and yet, whenever he made the slightest endeavour to approach the subject lying so near his heart, and consuming it with anxiety, she invariably managed to evade

it, and to turn the conversation into a totally different channel.

It was vexing in the extreme to find that directly he touched upon sentiment she drew in her horns at once, like a sensitive snail desiring to escape hurt. Hard as he had tried, every day rendered it more evident that he had completely failed to reach Dot's heart. And fully realizing this, he grew both depressed and discouraged, and asked himself a thousand times what was the reason of his unsuccess. Another thing puzzled him. As the weeks passed away he began to notice a difference in Dot. Unfortunately it was not one to inspire fresh hope, but it kept his mind in a state of tension.

She gradually lost the sweet serenity and gentle cheerfulness which had hitherto been her chief characteristics. The quiet monotony of her life no longer seemed to satisfy her. She was often grave and pre-

occupied. When in repose, the little, sweet, babyish face would assume quite a serious expression. Something appeared to trouble the girl, and once or twice Bob fancied that this trouble originated from her not being altogether happy in her home.

Now that he had seen more of Mrs. Lankester, and his first impressions instead of growing weaker had only become confirmed, he did not wonder at such being the case.

Mother and daughter were so unlike. The one so coarse and narrow minded, the other such a perfect little lady in every thought and feeling.

He made various essays to induce Dot to confide in him, but this she steadily refused to do. Still, although she never made any complaint, or acknowledged she had cause for unhappiness, he contrived to gather that her mother was trying to

force her into some course of action against which her whole nature revolted. As to what it might be he could only make vague guesses, and torture himself in the process. He had a kind of an idea that Dot did not like him, and that Mrs. Lankester wanted to make her marry him against her will. The mere notion rendered him sad, and yet he could not help thinking that there was a good deal of truth in it. Such a supposition, if correct, would quite account for Dot's reserve. The greater the pressure put upon her the more natural her coldness and gravity, and good God ! just to think of the girl he cared for, the girl he loved to distraction and almost idolised, being pestered into giving a luke-warm consent to their marriage ! Deeply as his affections were involved, he would rather bid her good-bye for ever than feel that she was being rendered miserable through his instrumentality, and being

goaded to commit a sin from which her pure, innocent soul shrank back in horror. Dot's eyes were clear as mirrors. It was a delight to look deep into their transparent depths. But would it not be a pain rather than a pleasure to see them cloud over at his approach; exquisite agony to feel his embraces passively endured, instead of returned? Bob's poor hungry heart clamoured for reciprocity. Toleration alone could not satisfy it. Here, alone in a foreign country, far from his kith and kin, with expectations disappointed and illusions crumbling one by one to the ground, he yearned for sympathy and companionship with an aching, insatiable yearning, which seemed to eat into the very vitals of his being.

No doubt the weather was in great measure responsible for the settled gloom that was gradually stealing upon him and rendering his spirit weary and joyless.

Since the end of November, protracted frost had interfered sadly with hunting arrangements. Frost, accompanied by a bright sun overhead, and a clear, if cold blue sky, acts as an invigorating tonic both to mind and body, but frost ushered in with a low grey haze, settling weird-like on the ice-bound earth, and occasionally diversified by cruel winds and sleetting snow, produces an exactly opposite effect, and runs the human barometer down to zero. At such seasons all the world is apt to look dark and drear. Nature varies and man varies with her. He sympathizes with her sombre moods, rejoices in her bright, sunshiny ones.

Neither was Bob's health good at this time. It, like his spirits, had succumbed to climatic influences, though he would have scorned to admit the fact, considering it, like all strong, young and healthy men, a derogatory one. But the cough, con-

tracted when he had tumbled into the brook, had now become chronic, and although he made light of it, and refused to take any precautions against the treacherous English climate to which he was not accustomed, it nevertheless had a debilitating effect upon his general system.

He longed to get out hunting again, if only as a means of diverting his thoughts from Dot, whose image was continually present in his mind, and prevented him from sleeping at night. In short, he lived in a state of fever; but the self-control exercised till the present time was too great to be continued. He felt a crisis was at hand, and that before long, whether his cause were hopeless or the reverse, he must speak out, and have an answer one way or the other. It was better to know one's fate than let one's manhood waste away in torturing suspense. Matters stood thus, when the hated and detested frost at last

began to show symptoms of giving. First it rained, and the drops froze as they fell, then it snowed, then rained again ; a cold, miserable downpour ; but though the thaw was a very half-hearted one, it restored to the roads their normal amount of mud, and roused hope in the breasts of fox-hunters, who came scurrying down from town in hot haste, or else forsook “rocketers” and rabbits with scant ceremony. But disappointment awaited these eager Nimrods. A fiat came forth from the kennels, which, although perfectly just in itself, created as much grumbling as such fiats always do—to the effect that another day must elapse before the ground would be in a fit state to admit of pursuing the fox.

When Bob was informed of Lord Littlebrane’s decision, he resolved to run up to London, having certain business matters connected with the estate to attend to. On reaching the station, he found that a train

leaving the metropolis at an early hour had just arrived. Having some little time to wait, he began walking up and down the platform, when, to his great surprise, he suddenly perceived Dot Lankester, clad in a neat striped petticoat, a well-fitting black jacket, and a small felt hat with a red wing.

His heart gave a big leap and went thump against his side. He was on the point of going up to speak to her, when he received an unpleasant shock, which seemed to bring his whole internal mechanism to a stand-still. And yet, the sight that disturbed him so much was a very simple one, and by no means calculated to upset his equanimity so entirely.

He saw a tall, well-built young man, with a fresh complexion and fair hair, jump out from a third-class compartment, and he heard Dot utter a sudden exclamation of delight, which caused the blood to mantle in her cheek.

That was all ; but then, impelled by an overpowering curiosity, he advanced a few steps, and saw something more—something that he would have given the whole world not to have seen.

'That tall young man—impudent, ill-mannered fellow—after a slight and embarrassed hesitation, stooped down and actually *kissed* Dot's upturned face with an air of horribly familiar proprietorship.

"You got my letter, I suppose," he said interrogatively. "But I need not ask."

"Oh ! yes, Will," she replied, her eyes bright with a light that Bob had never seen there before, and which did away with any doubts he might have entertained as to their owner's coldness of disposition.

"That is why I am here."

"I thought you would come to meet me, when you knew I was passing through."

"Naturally ; but oh ! Will, I feel so wicked."

“Wicked! Pooh! nonsense!” he said shortly. “What’s there to feel wicked about?”

“Mother does not know I’ve gone to see you.”

He made a wry face, and Bob, looking on, instinctively distrusted this young man, whose manner appeared to him to be forced and unnatural.

“No, I suppose not. But, I say, Dot, let’s come into the waiting-room. It’s jollier there than here. My train does not go on for another quarter of an hour, and,” with a sudden flush, “I’ve ever so much to tell you; something that you are bound to know sooner or later.”

“What is it, Will?” she asked, alarmed by the gravity of his tone. “If it’s bad news, don’t be afraid to tell me. I’ll try and bear it.”

And with that, she slipped her hand through his arm in quite a lover-like

manner, and looked up into his face, with oh! such a smile, and Bob, watching the proceedings with absorbing interest, felt a sharp pain shoot through his heart, just as if it had been stabbed by a knife. Ah! the agony of that moment, and the revelation it brought.

He slunk away with an icy, sick sensation stealing all over his frame, and catching at the very breath in his lungs, as it sought to force an exit. His brow was damp, his legs trembled beneath him. What did it mean? Was he mad, or dreaming some horrible dream? Will, Will—how he hated the name! who *was* Will? this man Dot came to meet at a public railway station, and who greeted her with such strange familiarity. He had known the Lankesters now for some time, but he had never once heard his name mentioned. Of that he was positive. He might be Dot's brother. For a moment

Bob breathed again. But no, if this were so, surely she would have spoken of him just as she spoke of Matilda, and of Matilda's children. And if he were not her brother? A mist rose before his eyes. He clutched at a column to steady himself. The world seemed so curiously unreal, so hazy and strange.

Then a sudden thought flashed across his mind with the vividness of certain death. Might it not be, that Mrs. Lankester had deceived him when talking about her daughter, and he had made a cruel mistake from the very beginning?

Yes, yes, he knew it was so, and yet he struggled against the belief. He thrust it from him fiercely, vehemently, with the energy of despair. But in vain. The conviction grew and strengthened, and refused to be banished.

All the time the train in which he was seated kept gliding through quiet green

fields dotted with resting sheep and browsing cattle, whilst it whirled past snug homesteads, nestling amongst yellow corn-ricks, and swept by picturesque villages, with red chimneys clustering round some tall grey steeple, the miserable young man kept saying to himself :

“ Now everything is explained. This was Dot’s secret—the cause of her coldness and reserve. She was head over ears in love with somebody else before ever I crossed her path.”

And then, in his anguish and his despair, he ground his teeth with impotent passion, and the veins on his forehead swelled till they stood out like whip-cord, whilst the storm within him raged strong.

Oh ! the misery, the mockery of life ! Was it for this that he had come to England ? Just to get a brief glimpse of happiness, and then to lose it for ever, and realize that the highest good vouchsafed to

man on earth was denied him? Oh! it was cruel, cruel.

Why had they not told him at once, before he had grown to love her with such power and intensity? The disappointment would have been comparatively slight. Why had not those who knew how matters stood warned him in time, and so prevented the mischief? This deadly hurt might have been spared him. A little frankness and foresight would have averted the evil. But no doubt it was nothing to them—and he laughed a bitter laugh—nothing to anybody if he fell desperately in love with a girl who was already another man's property. They would only sneer, and say he was a fool for not finding out how the land lay sooner.

He did not blame Dot. No unkind thought crossed his mind in connection with her. He exonerated her entirely. She had done all that modest maiden could

do. Looking back, he saw now quite clearly how from their very first meeting she had discouraged any symptom of sentiment, and steadily repressed all display of tender feeling.

But her father ! her mother ! Aye, her mother !

Mrs. Lankester was the one who had thrown dust in his eyes, who had egged him on by every means in her power, and who, he felt convinced, was bent on securing him as a husband for her daughter. She had purposely practised concealment. He was as sure of it as he was of his own existence. So he raved all the way up to town. But after awhile his passion spent itself. It left him shaken to the innermost depths of his being, but calmer, juster. He even tried to argue against the evidence of his own senses.

After all, it was just possible he might be mistaken. Perhaps Will was a cousin.

Girls were often very fond of their cousins in an innocent, confiding way. But no, Dot's look of ineffable content destroyed the supposition. No girl could look at a man like that unless she were thoroughly in love with him. It was useless trying to explain away facts just because they had dealt a death-blow to his hopes.

There was not much to be done under the circumstances. But one thing he could do ; namely—know the worst. He would keep silence no longer. The passion that consumed his heart should find an outlet once, even if it must remain mute ever after. Thus he resolved.

But it would be too late to see Dot that evening on his return from town. The anguish must be endured for yet a few hours more. On the next day, at the earliest possible hour, he would seek an interview.

Then, on a sudden, he remembered with

a species of grim satisfaction, that Mrs. Lankester was confined to her room by rheumatism. He should see Dot alone, thank God ! and he knew her well enough to feel convinced that from her lips, if not from her mother's, he should hear nothing but the truth. Dot's statements could be absolutely relied upon. *She* would not deceive him.

Bob spent a restless, wakeful, and miserable night. Sleep obstinately refused to visit his tired eyelids. Coloured lights, kaleidoscopic in shape and variety, danced beneath them, and still further fatigued his tired brain. His cough harassed him, and rendered him hot and feverish. Thought, that horrible nightmare of active minds, effectually prevented any ease. He tossed and tumbled between the sheets, and counted the slow, interminable hours, until at length dawn brought temporary unconsciousness. When he arose next

morning he felt ill, both bodily and mentally. During the last month or six weeks his nerves had been kept in a state of perpetual tension. Now they were sur-excited and utterly unhinged. The unexpected apparition of Will had proved too much for them.

Out of doors everything was in unison with his feelings. The thaw—such as it was—still continued. The sky was grey, so also was the earth ; a leaden mist, weird, ghostly, phantom-like seemed to descend from the one and to exude from the other. It wrapped a sodden shroud around the landscape ; the trees were black, and shining with a moisture which trembled between ice and water ; patches of dirty honeycombed snow lay about in all directions. Occasionally, some loosened clod would come slipping down from the roof with a dull thud, and disintegrated particles splashed against the window-

panes. Oh! the misery, and chilliness, and dreariness of it all! The desolation that it conveyed! Bob sighed, as he gazed around him, at the big empty house, the wide park, the dripping shrubs, and the melancholy plantations. These things were very beautiful in their way, but they wanted sun. He missed the brightness and warmth of an Australian winter.

How strange it seemed, to think that Christmas Day was close at hand. He wondered what his mother and Belle and the little ones were about. What an age since he had seen them. How much he had lived and suffered in the time. He could hardly believe that this Bob Jarrett was the Bob Jarrett he had known in former days; such an utter change had come over him. Once he had been a high-spirited, happy-go-lucky young fellow, and now——

Into his aching heart there suddenly

surged a great, wild longing to see his mother, to feel her cool lips pressed to his, to hear her gentle voice bidding him go forth and be of good cheer.

“Oh ! mother, mother !” he cried aloud, in the bitterness of an anguish too great for many words, “ how I wish you were with me at this moment.”

Nevertheless he went out to meet his fate like a man, and the little maid-servant who answered Doctor Lankester’s front door bell had not the least suspicion how every nerve and pulse possessed by Mr. Robert Jarrett, of Straightem Court, were quivering like a girl’s, when she led him into the house and preceded him up the narrow staircase, to which by this time he was well accustomed.

CHAPTER IX.

LOVE BEFORE MONEY.

Bob was unceremoniously ushered into Dot's presence, without the girl being asked whether she were at home to visitors or not. The maid-servant had, for some time past, looked upon him as one of the family, and felt flattered by the attentions he was paying her young mistress.

In anticipation of a *tête-à-tête*, Bob had carefully prepared a little set speech, which he hoped would not only conceal his excessive nervousness, but also pave the way to asking that important question, "Who is Will, and in what relation does he stand to you? Is he your brother, your cousin, or your lover?" which he was dying to put.

But directly he saw Dot, he forgot all about his immediate intentions, and thought only of her, and what he could do to serve her. For she had been crying, there in the drawing-room, all alone by herself. His heart grew big at the thought of her distress. A pair of very red eyes, set in a piteous little pale face, unmistakably proclaimed that she was in trouble.

So suddenly had he come upon her that it was impossible to attempt any evasion, as she seemed to realize, for with evident embarrassment she advanced to meet him.

“Why, Miss Dot!” he exclaimed in agitated tones, her emotion proving communicative, “what on earth is the matter with you?”

There was something so sympathetic and concerned in his way of making the inquiry, that for all answer she sat down on the nearest seat, and hiding her face in her hands, burst into a perfect storm of tears

Her slight frame was shaken by sobs, which no effort appeared able to suppress.

The sight of such grief as this, simply maddened him, and rendered him oblivious of every consideration of prudence or self-control. His one instinct, one desire, was to comfort her.

In an instant, he was down on his knees by her side, his hat and stick rolling on the floor, whilst, unconsciously almost, a nervous arm stole round her waist—that slender waist which he had so often longed to encircle, and wondered whether he ever should.

“Dot, Dot! my darling, my own dear little woman, don’t cry, sweet one. I can’t bear to see you in this state. What is it that vexes you?”

“No—no—nothing. P—please—get—up, Mr. Jarrett.”

“I can’t. I won’t. Oh! Dot,” and he tore her hands from her face and devoured

them with passionate kisses. “ You must know how things are with me—you cannot have been blind all this time. Dearest, give me the right to take care of you, and love you. I will move heaven and earth to make your life happy, and keep all trouble from you. Tell me what your sorrow is, and let me share it.” The words were spoken at last. He clenched his teeth, and waited to hear what answer she would give him. A shudder ran through her frame. She tried to push away his arm with gentle force.

“ Don’t, Mr. Jarrett, please don’t. You—you mustn’t.”

“ Mustn’t!” he cried, with bitter pain. “ Oh ! Dot, I can’t help myself, for I do love you so dearly.”

“ Hush, pray don’t speak so.” And she put out a warning hand. But she might just as well have tried to stop a mountain torrent in its impetuous course.

“ It’s too late to tell me to keep quiet,” he went on, with growing passion. “ I can no longer remain silent.”

“ Indeed—indeed it would be best,” she interrupted.

“ Perhaps so, but one cannot always stop to choose the wisest course, even if one would. Dot, I am desperate, and must have an answer. Surely you can say yes or no.”

“ Why do you insist on giving yourself so much pain ? ” she asked sadly.

“ Because, as I have said before, I love you, and have loved you ever since the day you came trotting down the road, and opened that beastly gate for me. Of course you have not thought of me. All this comes as a surprise, but I will wait, Dot—wait years until you get to care for me a little bit, if only you will promise some day to be my wife. Darling, say that I have a chance.”

His eloquent words, full of passionate

sincerity, recalled her to herself, and to the gravity of the situation. With an effort she recovered her composure.

“Mr. Jarrett,” she said in a voice that tried hard to appear steady, looking at him with dim, compassionate eyes. “I am so dreadfully sorry—I—I hoped you would never put this question to me, for alas! I cannot answer it as you wish.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then he staggered to his feet, and looked wildly round the room. “You cannot,” he ejaculated. “Then there must be a reason, and my suspicions are confirmed.”

She hung her head, but made no reply.

“Dot, for heaven’s sake, don’t keep me any longer in suspense. This is a matter of life or death to me.”

“What is it you wish to know?” she asked almost inaudibly.

“I happened to be at the railway station yesterday morning, and I saw you. You

met a young man there ; he kissed you, and you seemed pleased that he should do so. Is he" — and his utterance grew thick—“is he anything to you ? I do not seek to pry into your affairs from idle curiosity, but I think I have a right to an answer.”

The colour flamed up into her face, but she answered with quiet dignity :

“ You shall have one, Mr. Jarrett. The gentleman you saw is my affianced husband. We have been engaged to each other for very nearly three years.”

“ Why did you not tell me this sooner ? ” The words burst from him hoarse and inarticulate.

“ How could I ? ” she replied mournfully, “ when my own parents refused to sanction the engagement.”

“ And you care for this man ? Dot, for Heaven’s sake, tell me the truth.”

“ Yes, I love him better than my life. I

would sacrifice everything in the world to be his wife."

At this answer, Bob's senses grew dim. The room suddenly swam before his eyes. A sound as of mighty waves dashing against the shore deafened his ears. For several seconds darkness descended upon his brain and literally paralyzed it with a hideous and oppressive power. He grasped at the back of a chair for support. The world, life, Dot Lankester, appeared like an indistinct dream. It was some time before he recovered sufficient consciousness to be aware that she was speaking to him and looking up into his face with anxious, frightened eyes.

"Oh! Mr. Jarrett. Are you ill? What is wrong? What—what have I done?"

He took no notice of her interrogations. His mind could contain but one thought.

"Is there no chance, Dot, none whatever? Can nothing alter your decision?"

he asked in a subdued, unnatural voice, which sounded strange even to himself.

The tears rushed to her eyes. An overpowering pity filled her being. He was so honest, so good and unselfish, so worthy of love, and yet—she had none to give.

“No,” she said softly but firmly. “I cannot raise false hopes. I have tried very hard to make you understand how things were. Of course, when we first met, it did not matter, and there seemed no special reason why you should be told about Will. But afterwards, when I began to suspect that you liked me, then, although I was not sure of the correctness of my suspicion, I did my very best to impress upon your mind the fact that some barrier existed between us. If I had spoken out, as perhaps I ought to have done, you might have considered me forward, presumptuous and conceited. It appeared to me immodest to make sure of a man’s love before

he had himself declared that his affections were engaged. I was placed in a dilemma, so held my peace, though I now feel I have been bitterly to blame." And once more the tears threatened to overflow their soft-fringed boundaries.

"No, Dot," he said sorrowfully. "You could not have told me the truth more surely and impressively than you did. Only, you see, I refused to take warning in time. I do not wish to accuse anyone, but your mother, some weeks ago, certainly led me to believe that you were heart-whole ; she even regretted the scarcity of eligible young men in this part of the country."

"If you knew mamma as well as I do, you would not have paid any attention to what she——" began Dot, but she checked herself suddenly, and blushed as red as a rose. Her young voice rang with an unconscious scorn, which revealed more, than any number of condemnatory speeches.

A long pause ensued, Bob's brows were knit. He was evidently recalling his first interview with Mrs. Lankester, and no very pleasant memories resulted.

Dot was the first to speak.

"Mr. Jarrett," she said at length, "I, for one, have never wilfully deceived you, but all the same, some little explanation is your due. You think you have been badly treated in this matter."

"Not by you," he interposed. "Never for one instant by you."

"If not by me, then by my relatives. It comes to the same thing. Have you patience to listen to a long story? if so I can render clear some few points that now very naturally puzzle you."

"Patience!" he retorted with keen misery. "When this is the last time I may ever be alone with you again. Oh! Dot, I resemble a miser counting his money. Every moment spent in your com-

pany is like precious gold. Would that your story would last as long as there is life in my wretched body."

She put her finger to her lips, gently rebuking the desolate and rebellious spirit he displayed, yet the heart within her was very sore, and swollen with compassion.

He had been such a true, staunch friend to her, and she liked him so much ; she so thoroughly appreciated his many sterling qualities, and the kindness and simplicity of his nature. Fate, and fate alone, had brought into her horoscope somebody else before she had ever had the chance of meeting him. Otherwise the issue might have been very different. Mr. Jarrett was rich, a splendid match in every way for the daughter of a humble village doctor. And Will was poor ; so poor that he could not afford to keep a wife, and might not be able to indulge in such a luxury for many years. Without being worldly, she knew

enough of the world to realize all the advantages offered by an alliance with Mr. Jarrett, of Straightem Court. Yet no thought of disloyalty to Will found even a temporary dwelling place in her mind, although since their last meeting a horrible suspicion embittered her very existence. She wished she had a twin sister exactly like herself in outward appearance, but infinitely more deserving in every other way, so that Bob could marry her and be comforted. "The pity of it, the pity of it." That was her predominating feeling. Such a waste of valuable affection—an affection calculated to make any girl supremely happy—thrown away in a wrong direction. Love, so precious and so holy, when genuine as in the present case, showered upon one who had not the power to return it. Everything at cross purposes, everything wrong. This was how Dot felt. Bob had paid her the greatest compliment a man can pay a

woman. Instead of filling her soul with joy, it had steeped it in sadness. All she could do to alleviate his sufferings was to give him her fullest confidence, and hold nothing back. Absolute frankness on her part might perhaps render things a little less hard to bear on his. It might console him somewhat, to learn that he had never had a chance of gaining her love, since her troth was plighted long before he had ever set foot in England, or dreamt of inheriting his uncle's property. If she had been brave and done violence to her feelings sooner, then he might have been spared much pain. She made a sign to Bob to be seated, then drawing her chair close beside him, began in a low but clear voice :

“ Did you happen to notice a grey stone house, just outside Smallborough, standing some little way back from the road, the day you were good enough to mount me on Kingfisher ? ”

“ You mean that quaint, old-fashioned house with an apple orchard? Yes, I remember it well.”

“ It was inhabited some few years ago by one Mr. Barrington, and his wife and children. In those days they were comfortably off, and Mr. Barrington lived the life of a country squire. The eldest boy, Will, when quite a child, displayed a perfect passion for surgery.”

“ *Your Will, Dot?* ” interrupted Bob.

“ Yes,” reddening, “ my Will.” Then she added under her breath, “ My Will that was; pray God he is so still.” When he was eighteen,” she continued in a louder key, “ my father, partly through friendship and partly because Will’s presence was an additional source of income, took him to live with us as a gentleman apprentice. At that time I was fifteen years old, but I had known Will ever since my childhood. We had had many a romp together, and he

always distinguished me from the other girls in the neighbourhood, and declared that I was his little sweetheart, and should marry him some day. When he came to live with us, and we saw each other constantly, our affection ripened. On his twenty-first birthday he went to my parents and asked them to give their consent to his courtship. To make a long story short, we were formally engaged."

"And how old were you?" asked her listener. "You look such a baby, even now."

"Just a few days over seventeen. Will and I had one week's perfect happiness, and then bad times came for both of us. His father woke up one fine morning to find himself ruined through the absconding and malpractices of a fraudulent trustee. Instead of poor Will receiving an income, he had now to work for his living in earnest, and could congratulate him-

self on having adopted a profession. I hardly like to repeat all that took place in our family. Suffice it, that my mother, who as long as she thought Will's people were rich, quite approved of the marriage, and in fact had done her best to promote it, now suddenly turned round and refused to sanction our engagement."

"That was awful hard lines upon you," murmured Bob.

"Yes, it was, for she insisted upon my giving Will up, and having nothing more to say to him."

"And did you?"

"How could I? People can't change like that simply because they are told to. You can order a good many things in this world, but you can't order a loving heart to transfer its allegiance."

"Aye, that's true," sighed Bob regretfully.

"I could no more desert poor Will when

he was in trouble, and most needed sympathy and encouragement, than fly," continued Dot warmly. "I refused flatly to obey my mother's bidding. Then came scenes, horrible to remember. We have never been quite friendly since."

"Did not your father take your part? He seems so fond of you."

"Yes, in a way. He was far from approving of my mother's conduct, but he did not dare say much, on account of Matilda, whose poverty is always thrown in his face. Neither did he at all like the idea of a long engagement, likely to last for years. In short, the marriage was broken off, only Will and I vowed when we wished each other good-bye, that we would be true and faithful, and never, *never*, NEVER marry anybody else." Dot here tried hard to suppress a sob. She could not tell any living being, the new trouble that weighed so heavily upon her spirits. Her short

interview with Will had left her sadder than before. He seemed to have become estranged, and to be concealing something from her.

“And were your father and mother aware of this resolution ? ” asked Bob,

“ Oh ! dear, yes. Papa did what he could to help us..by getting Will a minor appointment at one of the big London hospitals, which at all events enabled him to keep himself. As for my mother, she refused to allow the poor boy’s name to be mentioned in her presence, and so you see —you see,” said the girl, breaking down completely, “ that was how you never came to hear anything about him. But mother was not as much to blame as you seem to think, since although I considered myself engaged, she did not.”

Bob had grown paler and paler during the above recital. It effectually quenched any last remaining hopes, and made his

cup of bitterness overflow. Dot's love was evidently no mere idle fancy, but a deep-rooted passion, which neither opposition nor distance had been able to overcome. That fortunate Will! What if he were penniless? He envied him from the bottom of his heart, and would gladly have changed places with him, had it been possible.

"Do you understand?" said Dot, wondering at his continued silence.

"Yes," he said in a hoarse, constrained voice, "I understand, and there is nothing more to be said. I only beg pardon for my folly."

"Don't call it folly," she returned. "It is 'kismet.' We mortals have really very little power over the march of events."

"What were you crying about when I came in?" he asked abruptly.

She flushed crimson. It was impossible to reveal the distracting thought that tor-

mented her, and which was the real cause of her present disquietude.

“It seems that one of the people in the village saw me at the station yesterday. Will was only passing through on business. I had not seen him for a whole year, and he wrote and begged me to meet him ; and oh ! Mr. Jarrett, I could not help doing so. I knew if I asked mamma’s leave she would not give it, so I went without. She was dreadfully angry, and said such cruel, cruel things.”

Dot could not tell the whole truth ; and it was easier to account for her red eyes in this way than in any other.

“What sort of things ?” inquired Bob, not trusting himself to look at his companion.

“She went on about my giving Will up, and called him a pauper and horrible names, which made my blood boil, and then she wanted me to promise to——”

“Marry me, eh?” he said grimly. “Well, go on,” he continued, as Dot turned scarlet. “Had you any other cause of trouble, or was that the sole one?”

“Is it very wicked to wish for things one can’t have?” she rejoined innocently.

“I don’t know; but if it is, I am a veritable fiend at this moment.”

“I do so wish I had five thousand pounds.”

“Five thousand pounds! Why, what would you do with such a sum?”

“Give it to Will, of course. He has a splendid opening. An excellent practice has been offered to him in one of the suburbs of London, which is worth between four and five hundred a year, but the present practitioner would have to be bought out, and that is just what Will can’t do.”

“Is there no chance of his getting the money, or of his father helping him?”

“No, none, whatever. Mr. Barrington can’t, poor man, even if he would. We had a long talk about it yesterday, and put our heads together, but neither of us could see our way in the least. Will says this practice would be the making of him, and that it is absurd for people to think of marrying without a proper income.”

“Was he always so wise?” inquired Bob.

She hesitated a moment, and then with a sudden burst of tears, said, “No, not always. Once upon a time he never seemed to care about the money part of the business, but he does now.”

“And was that what you were crying about, Dot?”

“Yes, I suppose so. What with one thing and another, I felt regularly out of sorts this morning.”

Bob stood up, as if to go. A wild, insensate joy surged up into his heart

when he heard that a very real obstacle existed, which would prevent the girl from becoming Will Barrington's wife, at all events for a considerable time. Delay meant a chance still. *He* might profit by the young people's difficulties. The next moment he felt thoroughly ashamed of himself for harbouring such a feeling. Was this his love? this his devotion?

What a poor, base, selfish passion was that, which refused to rejoice in the happiness and welfare of its object. How mean and unworthy of an honest man. A flush of self-abasement coloured his cheek.

“Dot,” he said, “answer me one question, though it is absurd my asking it. Do you care very much for this Will of yours, so much that you feel as if you could not live without him?”

She looked up into his face. The solemnity of his manner awed her.

“Yes, Mr. Jarrett, that is exactly how

I do feel. You are not angry with me, are you?"

"Angry? No; why should I be angry simply because the love of as dear and honest a girl as ever walked this earth is not for me? Only I wish to goodness that Will had never been born."

"He came first," she said simply. "I knew him long before I knew you. I can't help myself now."

His sense of rectitude admitted the plea. There was no gainsaying its truth.

"Yes," he said, "he came first, lucky beggar. That's where the mischief lay. And now I am going. Good-bye, Dot, dear, may God bless you, and send you health and happiness."

The tears trickled down her face. There was something in her heart which she scarcely understood, and which she suppressed as treason to Will.

"Good-bye, Mr. Jarrett. You will let

me be your friend still, won't you? I—I
—shall see you sometimes?"

"Yes, most certainly. But I think I shall go away for a bit—at all events until I have got over this." Then he took her hand in his, and added hastily, "And, I say, Dot, don't be low-spirited. Look at the cheerful side of things, there's a dear. I feel certain they'll all come right in the end." And with that he was gone, leaving her to wonder what was the special quality which enabled him, when he suffered so cruelly himself, to draw a veil over his own disappointment, and seek only to comfort her. All at once she realized that he had even higher attributes than she had given him credit for. The pleasant, upright, straightforward, yet withal somewhat simple and unpolished youth was capable of real heroism. She felt that had it not been for Will's prior claims, she never could have sent him away. But Bob's heart as

he walked towards home might have been made of lead.

Every hope that had ever nourished it, and caused it to beat fast and slow by turns, was now finally crushed. He felt as if his life were at an end. All the joy and the physical enjoyment of existence had vanished. What were wealth and position without Dot to share them?

Henceforth there was nothing to look forward to, nothing to strive for, nothing to live for. He looked up abstractedly at the sky. It was grey and sombre. But not greyer or more sombre than his thoughts. He glanced at the cold earth, enshrouded in spectral mist. It was drear and gloomy. But not drearier or gloomier than seemed his future.

How the wind blew, and soughed through the leafless trees! How it penetrated to the very bones, and defied even the warmest clothing.

And out in Australia the sun was shining, the cattle were straying over the brown ground, panting for shade, and his mother was probably at that very moment basking in the verandah with the little ones around her. Oh! the sun, and the warmth, and the peace. How he longed for them all. With Schopenhauer, his weary soul cried out for “the blissful repose of nothing.”

And then a chilly blast opposed his progress, the rain came sleetting down, and he coughed. The cough reminded him that the body has inherited a heritage of pain. Through his back, through his chest and his shoulder-blades there stole a dull aching sense of discomfort, which came as an aggravating accompaniment to his mental misery, just as if the one were not enough without the other.

CHAPTER X.

JUMPING MUDDYFORD BOTTOM.

FORTUNATELY, unhappy thoughts, like everything else on this earth, are subject to the law of finality. Before long Bob's meditations were interrupted in an altogether unexpected fashion.

As he turned in at the gate of his own park, the blast of a horn fell upon his ears, waking echoes that had slept silent for many a day ; and a few minutes afterwards he found himself overtaken by the whole of the Morbey Anstead Hunt, who chased their fox into his shrubberies, and pursued him hotly, until the hounds became perplexed by the number of fresh animals that sprang up. The rain now came down in torrents, discharged with icy force from a

lowering cloud overhead. So fierce was this shower that it caused a halt in the proceedings, and people with one accord began to look about for an available place of shelter.

“Won’t you come in? You had much better all come in,” cried Bob, addressing friends and foes alike. “It’s not a bit of good standing out there and getting wet through. Come in, come in, and welcome.”

So hearty was the hospitality offered, and so intensely disagreeable the weather, that a considerable number of people gladly responded to his invitation. One set the example to the other, and very soon there was quite a crowd of men and women inside the spacious hall of Straightem Court, tossing off Bob’s brown sherry with evident relish, and nibbling daintily at sandwich or biscuit. The servants had not had such a bustling up for many a year, and were amazed at so heterogeneous

an influx of visitors, the majority of whom their late master would not have condescended to talk to, much less ask beneath his roof. “Quantity, but not quality,” sneered the pompous butler to his satellite, as he passed him bearing a loaded tray of empty glasses. As for Bob, it cheered him to see human faces around. It was far better than coming home and finding the place empty, and having nothing to do but sit down and think over the events of the morning. He tried to drive away thought by moving about among his guests and personally attending to their wants, and he won the hearts of all the farmers present by ringing the bell and ordering up some very choice old port for their especial benefit, and wishing good luck to agriculture. But he looked in vain for Lord Littelbrane. His lordship was as obstinately stand-off as on the never-to-be-forgotten occasion of Stiffton Flat races. Neither

could he discern General Prosieboy, which caused him some slight wonderment, for he had made a pretty correct estimate of that gentleman's character.

However, he would probably have felt consoled for his absence, had he been aware of the fact, that the gallant old warrior was at that very moment imbibing a glass of stiff whisky and water in a covered yard at his (Bob's) expense, and exchanging witticisms with the under-housemaid.

Ladies are proverbially brave, and Lady De Fochsey, not calculating on quite such a day, had gone out hunting with the rest. Stiffshire was a county that offered but few resources for the stay-at-homes. Those who did not follow the chase led lives of absolute stagnation ; and a frost was terrible, for all the idle young men went posting off to London immediately, and there were none but old fogies left to talk to.

Now her ladyship's smart scarlet jacket, with its white facings, light waistcoat and etceteras, had cost the best part of sixteen guineas; as a consequence she entertained a great regard and veneration for it. Having sallied forth without a covert coat, she was in considerable trepidation at the thought of the beautiful, extra fine cloth stretching, and the entire garment thus becoming too large. It fitted without a wrinkle at present, but what might be the result if once it got wet through? This was the first season she had ventured to appear in "pink," and so far she had been fortunate enough to escape any drenching rain. The scarlet came out as fresh and bright as ever, and filled her every time she wore it with an impression of her own good looks, which to a naturally pretty woman was eminently agreeable and gratifying in the extreme.

But to-day the weather threatened to

rob this much-prized garment of all its brilliancy. After her last somewhat unfriendly parting with Mr. Jarrett, she had resolved in a fit of petulance to have nothing more to say to him. There was a point when running after men became a nuisance, and did not repay the inevitable trouble. If, in spite of all his aptitudes, Bob refused to act the part of "kindred spirit," why, then she must look about her and find one elsewhere. A vulgar saying, but a true, had it that there were "as many fish in the sea as ever came out of it."

It was quite possible to establish psychological relations with some individual more responsive, and altogether endowed with finer sensibilities. Mr. Jarrett was good-looking, but horribly matter-of-fact. He looked at things from quite a vulgar and material point of view.

In spite of such reflections, when her

ladyship saw several of her friends and acquaintances march boldly into Straightem Court, after first leaving their horses in the spacious stables, she put her pride in her pocket, and followed suit. The scarlet jacket was more important at this juncture than dignity; already there were great, dark splashes upon it, and she could almost fancy that the waist had begun to expand.

So she jumped hastily to the ground, threw her reins to the nearest groom, and entered the house without more ado. Her theory was, that woman should always cultivate a chameleon-like nature, since in the first place circumstances forced her to be adaptive; and in the second, it gave her such an enormous advantage, when she could present many fronts to her natural enemy—man. Nothing disconcerted him so much as blowing hot and cold by turns.

When Bob saw who the new arrival was, a smile spread over his features.

“Lady De Fochsey!” he exclaimed in tones of unmistakable gratification, “this is indeed kind. I thought you had made up your mind, after our last meeting, to join the majority, and cut me dead.”

She looked a little embarrassed at this speech, but turned it off with a laugh.

“You were a very foolish, headstrong boy, but I dare say you have grown wiser by this time, and at any rate, I intend to give you another chance,” she said with a pretty arch smile.

“I’m delighted to hear it. I could not bear to think we had quarrelled.”

“It was your own fault,” she rejoined, sipping at a glass of sherry which Bob had just handed her. “But as a proof of my magnanimity I give you your choice. What is it to be, war or peace? Decide either way you like.” And she made a little coquettish grimace, quite thrown away upon the person it was intended to captivate.

“ Oh ! peace, peace,” he murmured hurriedly; “ I am far too miserable at the present moment to care to be at loggerheads with any one.”

She raised her eyebrows in astonishment, and looked at him keenly and critically. As she did so, she was struck all at once by the altered expression of his countenance, which made it appear almost ten years older. His despondency and dejection were so great that he did not even seek to conceal them, as most certainly he would have striven to do later on. A deep soul-weariness prevents good acting.

“ Why, Bob,” she ejaculated, falling back into the familiar style of nomenclature first adopted, “ what on earth’s the matter with you ? You look all to pieces.”

“ I look what I am, then.”

“ But what’s wrong. What are you miserable about ? ”

“ No—no—nothing,” he stammered in

return; “at least, nothing that I care to talk of.”

“Is it money?”

“No.”

“Business?”

“No.”

“Family worries?”

“No.”

“Then it’s love as a matter of course. It can’t possibly be anything else.”

He tossed off a glass of wine, but made no reply. She, however, needed none.

“I suppose the ‘beautiful being’ who I chaffed you about the other day is at the bottom of this tremendously tragical affair, eh?” she resumed insistently. “Has the young person not been kind?”

Bob still maintained an obstinate silence. It was torture to have his freshly-inflicted wound so mercilessly probed by a cruel female hand. He writhed like a captured bird caught in a net.

“Come, it’s not very civil of you to decline to answer a question made by a lady. How is she?”

“How is who?” he asked irritably, goaded into speech at last.

“Why! your little friend in the patched habit—the doctor’s daughter; or if you want it put clearer, the girl you were carrying on with so outrageously.”

The blood flew to his brow. Indignation made every muscle quiver.

“I presume you mean Miss Lankester! and as for carrying on, as you call it, I’m not carrying on at all.”

“Oh! aren’t you? Since when have you come to your senses, pray?”

“Since half-past ten o’clock this morning, if you must know the precise hour.”

“Well, I’m glad you’ve escaped from that exceedingly forward and immodest young woman. And all I can say is, that

the way she ran after you out hunting was really quite disgusting."

"She didn't do anything of the sort," he retorted angrily. "And please don't slander her."

"I'm not slandering her; nasty, sly little thing, though I'm sure she deserves it."

"Yes, you are, and if you want to hear the truth of the matter, I'll tell it you, rather than stand by and hear Miss Lankester abused."

"Well?" said her ladyship interrogatively, making no attempt to conceal her curiosity.

"Miss Lankester, instead of behaving in the manner you assert, happens to be already engaged, and won't have a word to say to me. There!" And Bob clenched his teeth in anguish.

She shrugged her shoulders with a truly provoking gesture of incredulity. That a

person in the exceedingly humble position of a country doctor's daughter, should stick to any pre-formed engagement, when she had the chance of securing Mr. Jarrett, of Straightem Court, surpassed her comprehension altogether. Her mind could not realize the possibility of so tremendous an act of folly.

“Pshaw! What's the good of telling me such nonsense as that. I really wonder where you expect to go to.”

But again he relapsed into silence. Her lively sallies could not succeed in rousing him from the dejection in which he was steeped. This fact dawned upon her by degrees. She began to be aware that something was very seriously wrong with him. Now that there was no longer any question of rivalry she could afford to be generous and sympathetic. Besides, men were often caught on the rebound. If he had not been so good-looking she would not have

troubled herself about him one bit, but as it was, she could not help feeling interested in his sorrows—imaginary or otherwise.

“Bob,” she said with increasing kindness. “Am I to understand that you have proposed to this little insignificant girl, and that she has actually refused you?”

He turned sharply away. Her eyes seemed to sear him like scorching flame. Why could she not leave him alone? What was it to her, whether he had asked Dot Lankester to be his wife or not?

“Lady De Fochsey,” he said with a petulant gesture, “you are of course at liberty to draw any conclusions you choose from our conversation. I can only say that the subject is a painful one, and I would feel obliged by your not discussing it. I—I”—breaking down suddenly—“am very unhappy.”

She might be foolish, but apart from her vanities and coquetry, she was by no means

a bad-hearted woman. Moreover, she felt that she had pressed him a trifle ungenerously. His utter despondency caused her to experience a sensation of genuine emotion, such as she had not felt for a long time.

How nice it must be to be loved like this. How happy it would make her to inspire so real a passion.

There was something artless and engaging about him; simple, perhaps, yet withal different from other men of her acquaintance. His youth, too, appealed to her. Ever since she had turned five-and-twenty she had developed a strong partiality for boys. Candour and innocence were refreshing from their very rarity.

“Look here, Bob,” she said, “you and I may have had our little differences, but I’m not one to bear malice, and if you feel low-spirited, and in want of sympathy and consolation, why then,” giving his hand a

gentle pressure, “you know where to come.”

A lump rose up in his throat. He was much too wretched to care to avail himself of the invitation, but he felt that it was kindly meant. And a little kindness goes such a long way when one is in trouble. In a curiously husky voice he said, “Thank you,” and then hurried away to the nearest window, where he stood for several seconds resolutely forcing back a certain moisture that dimmed his eyesight. Lady De Fochsey had never been so near converting him into a medium capable of receiving and transfusing electric force, but her success was due to human sympathy and not to spiritualistic agencies. A break in the sky, a gleam of sickly light, and an abatement in the rain now caused those within doors to hurry out in search of their horses.

Directly his guests showed symptoms of

departing, Bob went upstairs and hastily donned hunting attire. He might as well go out as stay at home ; moreover, he felt in a mood when, to ride recklessly at a certain number of big fences, and to gallop at full speed across the green pastures would act as a sedative and bring relief to his overwrought nerves.

He had previously ordered Kingfisher to be got ready. He had never yet been on his back, having, up till to-day, religiously reserved his best horse for Dot ; but now—and a wave of bitterness flooded his spirit —what was the use of any longer keeping him for that purpose ? After what had passed, he felt that nothing would ever induce her to ride him again, and place herself under an obligation. He remembered her original reluctance, which of course would henceforth be intensified.

Oh ! how sad it was, to find all one's dreamings, dreams and not realities—to see

the airy structure of hope and love, so skilfully constructed in the chambers of one's mind, crumble away at the first unexpected stroke. What a blankness and dreariness remained behind when all the picturings of the imagination proved vain and could never be attained. How brightness turned to darkness, pleasure to pain, and youth to premature old age. Life was very, very cruel; despair its key-note. So he mused as he mounted his horse.

A minute or two later, Burnett sallied forth from the washhouse, where he had taken refuge, and calling to his hounds to follow him, trotted out on to the lawn, where he was soon joined by the entire field. By this time there was not much chance of hitting off the line of the hunted fox, so it was resolved to draw sundry plantations within the precincts of the park. A small spinney was first called upon, which immediately furnished a fine, white-tagged

old fellow. Judging from his behaviour he appeared to be a stranger, for, unlike the home-bred article, he showed no disposition to linger, but at once set his mask straight for the open.

Owing to the recent frost, the weather, and various causes, the Field was a much smaller one than usual, and all those who meant “going” could do so to-day, and had no excuse for lagging behind. Even the starting rush for the nearest available gate was comparatively mild, and no one got blocked for more than a few seconds. Consequently, everybody possessing the inclination secured a good start. A chorus of melodious music filled the air. From deep-throated followers burst the familiar sound which cheers the heart of every thorough sportsman. Hounds dashed out of the spinney and flashed across the green-sward like a silver comet.

What mattered then the wind and the

rain, when two-and-twenty couple were racing ahead, throwing their tongues joyously and flinging after their quarry with glorious dash and resolution? Who cared then if the sky were grey or blue, the atmosphere dry or moist, the wind chilly or the reverse? Every mind, human as well as canine, was concentrated on the chase. A look of determination stole over men's features. They set their jaws, tightened their reins, settled themselves in their saddles, and prepared to ride hard in defiance of cold and wet. In another minute they were out of the park and into the fields beyond. Here the fun began, for Reynard was evidently determined on putting roadsters to confusion, and chose a bee line across country.

Big, the fences round Straightem village were always, but to-day they seemed even bigger than usual, or else this crafty pug had a better notion of baulking the enemy.

Without hesitation he led his foes straight down to a yawning bottom, with a thick-set fence on the near side, and a positively ghastly gully on the off. The line of pursuit was checked. A more awkward obstacle could not well be imagined. In the annals of the Hunt it was recorded that no man had ever cleared Muddyford Bottom at this particular spot.

With muttered execrations, the leading horsemen—Burnett amongst the rest—pulled up and looked round for a place where, with a crawl, a splash and a lucky scramble, they could get in and out.

Bob had two advantages over his companions. He was a stranger and did not know the country, and he was reckless—at all events on this particular day. To break his neck out hunting seemed to him just then the highest good that was left to him in life. He courted death, though death, like a shy maiden, is apt to refuse too

ardent a wooer. The bigger the fence, the more eagerly did Bob welcome it. It did not matter what evil befell him, now that Dot had given him his *congé*. Of any effect he was likely to produce, he did not think for an instant. He was much too miserable to care any longer for other people's opinions.

His face was drawn, his eyes wild and bloodshot. Those who noticed his appearance whispered that he had been drinking heavily, but this was a libel. He might not be over sane, but at all events liquor had nothing to do with his insanity. It was unrequited passion that rendered him oblivious to personal danger, and lent him a courage bordering on madness.

Anyhow, whilst his neighbours were coasting up and down the Bottom, and hounds were rapidly disappearing from vision, though their keen notes came floating backward to the ear—for the ladies

were garrulous to-day—he took Kingfisher sharply by the head, turned him round and rushed him at the formidable chasm.

The good horse was only just out of his stable, and as fresh as paint. He needed no second invitation, especially with the pack stealing away in front of him. Besides, it required an exceptionally awkward fence to stop him. Other horses might find Stiffshire tax their powers, but it was not often that he failed to prove equal to the occasion. But best of all, his heart was in the right place.

He made a magnificent bound, and did not attempt to refuse. Only when he saw what an abyss confronted him on the landing side, he jerked his hind quarters round with a desperate effort. Even then he dropped both hind legs, and threw Bob right on to his neck. For a second it was touch and go whether he would fall or not, but he was as active as a cat, and making

a gallant struggle, recovered himself, and was up and away in less time than it takes to tell of.

For once, Muddyford Bottom had been fairly jumped. It measured four and twenty feet across, and so much was it dreaded that not another soul ventured to follow Bob's example. He was alone with hounds, and gained an advantage which throughout the run none succeeded in wresting from him.

The Mutual Adorationites gnashed their teeth with impotent rage. They could not produce a Nimrod to compete with the much abused and despised "outsider," whom, without even knowing, they had seen fit to condemn. Not one of their number could touch him. He showed his back to the whole crew, lords, generals and captains, and in some quarters there was glee, in others, tribulation.

Meantime, Bob pursued his victorious

career. His blood was literally on fire. A wild, hot glow pervaded his entire frame. He was scarcely conscious of his own actions. It still seemed to him as if he were trying to battle his way out of some dark nightmare which oppressed his spirit with a maddening intensity. He kept his eye vacantly fixed on the leading hounds, and took little or no heed of the intervening fences. Kingfisher was left to negotiate them as he pleased, and perhaps for that reason jumped all the more perfectly, for he dearly liked having his head and not being interfered with.

And now it came on to pour again mercilessly. In five minutes the rain had penetrated through every portion of Bob's coat. But he never even noticed it. He was impervious to outside considerations. The chaos of his brain refused external detail. Even excitement could not

altogether chase away despair, though it lightened it for the time being.

Had he been riding any other horse but Kingfisher, he must have “come to grief” a dozen times over. As it was, his escapes were marvellous. Oxers, bullfinches, break-neck timber, nothing could stop him. Where the hounds went there went he, himself and steed seeming to possess supernatural powers.

That run is famous to this day in the chronicles of the Morbey Anstead Hunt. *The Field* and the *County Gentleman* wrote such glowing paragraphs about it, that it is needless to describe it minutely. Even those who most felt their defeat admitted that one man had the best of it throughout, and that this fortunate and much-to-be envied individual was Robert Jarrett, Esq., of Straightem Court.

When, after fifty-five panting minutes, Bob pulled up his foaming horse, and

held the dead fox aloft, amid a circle of clamouring hounds, whilst he waited for Burnett to make his appearance, he little dreamt of the glory he had gained, or the reputation won. Nevertheless, during those few sweet moments, he *almost* enjoyed himself and forgot Dot. But not for long.

When the fun was over and the excitement at an end, then the internal force evaporated which had hitherto sustained him. A sick, weary, deadening feeling stole over his frame. He had but the one horse out, who had earned undying fame, but the gallant animal was done to a turn, which was not to be wondered at, seeing that having received no orders to the contrary, Matthews had watered and fed him as usual. And now Bob patted Kingfisher mechanically on the neck, and turned his head towards home.

Hunting was a first-rate sport. No one relished it more than he did—but, after all, hunting was not Dot, and without Dot life had lost its flavour.

Eleven miles as the crow flies had that good, stout-hearted fox taken him from Straightem Court. It was quite dark when he reached home. The short December day had closed in, and the rain still descended with steady persistency.

He felt it now, for the warmth which had animated his blood while the run lasted, had slowly given place to a deadly chill.

He shivered as he rode under the dark trees of the avenue, and heard drop after drop roll to the ground. When he got into the stable yard, he was so stiff and so numbed that Matthews had to help him to dismount. His hands and feet had lost all sensation.

“Take a warm bath, sir, take a warm bath, and ’ave a drop of something hot to

drink," counselled the groom, as his old master stood and trembled. "It's been a mortal cold day, and you've got a regular chill on you."

But Bob, instead of listening to good advice, insisted on loitering about, until he had ascertained that Kingfisher was none the worse for his exertions.

"I should think myself a very poor sort of sportsman, Matthews," he said, "if I looked after No. One before looking after my horse."

Matthews smiled approvingly. The more he saw of Bob the better he liked him.

"There's a many gentlemen," he said, "in this country who rides well, but there be mighty few who considers their 'osses afore themselves. Times 'as haltered since I was a boy. But now go and get changed, do-ee. What am I here for, except to see after the nags?" Upon which, Bob entered the house.

CHAPTER XI.

A PARTING BEQUEST.

THE next day Bob was seriously ill ; so ill that he was obliged to send for Doctor Lankester to come and see him in his professional capacity. He had had no rest all night, a sharp pain in his side, accompanied by an unusual difficulty in breathing having quite prevented his getting any sleep. During the long hours of darkness he jumped the Muddyford Bottom a hundred times in imagination, whilst every formidable fence cleared during that never-to-be-forgotten run, appeared photographed upon his brain with the distinctness of a miniature.

Doctor Lankester found him sitting

cowering over a blazing fire in the smoking-room.

His eyes were bright, his cheeks unnaturally flushed, his skin dry and parched ; yet, in spite of these and other feverish symptoms, he complained of an intense feeling of chilliness.

“ You say you have a pain in your left side ? ” asked the doctor.

“ Yes, dreadful. It’s just like a knife running through one.”

“ H’m ! And you experience difficulty in breathing ? ”

“ I do. Once or twice during the night I thought I should have been suffocated.”

“ Are you hot and cold by turns, or do you feel cold all the time ? ”

“ Now you mention it, I get awfully warm every now and then.”

“ Ah ! I thought so. You will have to be careful, my dear boy, and do exactly as I tell you.”

Although Doctor Lankester was far too experienced in his profession to alarm a patient needlessly, his grave countenance showed that he did not at all like Bob's appearance. Acting with medical authority, he ordered him back to bed at once, recommending warmth and quiet. He saw these orders obeyed, and remained some little time giving instructions to Charles, who was appointed to wait upon the invalid.

“What a fuss about nothing!” exclaimed Bob, trying to speak cheerily. But though he professed a great disdain of coddling, he was glad to be forced to lie still, since he realized that he was considerably worse than he chose to admit.

Doctor Lankester gave him no choice, but put him on the sick list there and then, and in his heart of hearts he thankfully submitted.

After a while the doctor took his leave,

saying he would send round some suitable medicine and look in again later on.

He was as good as his word, for towards evening he once more visited Straightem Court, and stayed there over an hour, personally seeing that all his directions had been carried out. This having been done, he was distressed to find Bob worse instead of better, and the suspicions which he had entertained earlier in the day now received the fullest confirmation. He no longer doubted what his friend's malady was, and therefore took it upon himself to give the necessary orders.

Entirely on his own responsibility he telegraphed to a well-known London institution for a trained nurse to be sent down the first thing the next morning. He knew now that the young man's illness was no passing indisposition, but likely to prove a serious affair, requiring the greatest care and attention. Bob's lonely

position filled him with compassion, and he was determined, individually, to do all he could do for him.

When he reached home he said as much to his daughter. Mrs. Lankester had gone to dine with a relation, and was not expected back till the evening.

“I’m afraid our friend Jarrett is in a bad way,” he concluded, after giving Dot a detailed account of his patient’s condition. “I don’t like the look of things at all. He doesn’t know it, but he has got a weak chest naturally, and our English climate has played the bear with him.”

“Oh! papa,” cried the girl, alarmed by the gravity of her father’s manner, “remember how good he has been to us. Don’t let us leave the poor young man alone in that great, dreary house. Can’t we have him here and nurse him?”

“He is scarcely in a fit state to be moved at present. Besides, your mother is

not a good one with illness in the house. It fidgets her and puts her out."

"True, but I can't bear to think of his having no one but servants to look after him."

Her father smiled approval. She had inherited his own warm heart.

"You don't consider me of much good, that's quite clear, Dot. Will you feel satisfied when I tell you that it is my intention to sit up with Mr. Jarrett to-night."

"You? Oh! papa, that is kind of you. But is he very bad, then?"

"I'm afraid so. He is in for an attack of pleurisy, which threatens at any moment to assume a dangerous nature. It seems he went out hunting yesterday and got wet to the skin."

"But he was here," she cried impulsively. "He did not leave me till eleven o'clock."

“I don’t know how that may be, but the lad told me himself he had gone with the hounds and caught a regular chill. Dot,” with a kindly look stealing over his face, “we must pull him through if we can.”

“Oh! yes, yes; of course we must. Only it all seems so sudden, and I can’t realize that he is ill. But you will want a nurse. Why should not I be his nurse?”

“I have already telegraphed for one.”

“May not I help? I should like to if I might.” And she looked up with a pair of pleading eyes.

“You shall later on, Dot; but just now I want you to stay at home and tell your mother when she comes back where I am spending the night, so that she need not be under any alarm.”

Two or three days passed away, and in spite of every care and all conceivable remedies, the patient showed no signs of

improvement. In vain did Doctor Lankester prescribe opium and calomel and apply mustard poultices ; they proved powerless to subdue the disease. Another doctor was called in, but he entirely approved of the treatment already adopted, and beyond one or two trifling suggestions had no advice to offer. Meantime Doctor Lankester was beginning to entertain grave fears for the result, and redoubled his attentions. What puzzled and distressed him most was the feeble vitality possessed by this apparently strong, healthy young man ; Bob seemed to have so little recuperative power, and so small a share of that physical clinging to life which is a characteristic of nine human beings out of ten. He could not help thinking that something lay heavy on his mind.

Before long Bob became delirious, and then the good doctor guessed at the cause. He was deeply touched when he learnt how

great was the invalid's affection for his daughter. He would have welcomed him as a son-in-law for his own sake, quite apart from any worldly considerations, having contracted a great liking for the young man. Now he could only show his good will by devoting all his spare hours to him.

At the end of an anxious week, Dr. Lankester almost gave up hopes of Bob's recovery. True, the fever and pain had left him, but he seemed frightfully weak, and totally unable to rally. Unless some change speedily took place, he foresaw that death from exhaustion was imminent.

On the morning of the eighth day, as he was sitting in the sick room, he was startled by seeing Bob's eyes fixed earnestly upon him, with an expression of fully restored consciousness, which boded well.

“Doctor,” he said feebly, “tell me the truth; I can bear it. Am—am I going to

die?" and his eyes looked larger and more solemn than ever.

Doctor Lankester made a vain effort to speak, but a lump rose up in his throat, and when he tried to give a consolatory answer, his voice failed him.

"You need not trouble to tell me what I want to know," continued Bob, after a slight pause, during which he had narrowly watched his companion's countenance. "After all, it was a foolish question."

"There—there may be a chance yet," faltered the doctor in return. "You seem better to-day."

"Do I? I'm sorry for that. The truth is, I don't care to go on living."

"But, my poor, dear friend, you are so young to think of death as a refuge from trouble."

"That may be. But some young people feel as old as the hills, and long for rest,

and I am one of them. Can't you—can't you understand?"

"Yes," huskily, "I think so. I wish it might all have been different."

"Thank you, doctor. Thank you for saying those words. I always felt that I had a friend in you. But don't be angry with—with Dot," turning red as he pronounced the girl's name. "It was not her fault."

"No, I suppose not. These things can't be helped."

"And you see, if—if she had grown to care for me, she would have been sorry now, and as it is"—with a wan smile—"nobody is much the worse. Dick will step into my shoes when I am gone, and the only person who will really feel my loss deeply, will be my mother. Poor, dear old mum! I wish I could have seen her again just to tell her not to mind."

"Hush! Bob, don't talk like that. You

may pull through yet," cried Dr. Lankester. " My belief is you could if you would. It's your infernal indifference to life that keeps you back in my opinion. If only you had something to look forward to you would pick up in no time."

" I believe I should," answered the patient with quiet conviction. " But that's not likely."

Doctor Lankester's mouth was twitching. His eyes were full of tears. He could no longer hide his emotion, and rose as if to leave.

" Are you going ? " said Bob. " If so, I wish you would do me a favour."

" Of course I will. What is it ? "

" I want you, please, to send to Stiffton for a solicitor, and tell him to drive over here at once."

" Yes, Bob. Anything more ? "

The colour flamed up into the young man's cheeks.

“Doctor,” he said hesitatingly, “do you—do you think Dot would come and see me? I should so like to speak to her once more.”

“She shall come, but on one condition. You must not excite or tire yourself.”

Whereupon Doctor Lankester hurried out of the room, too much overcome to continue the conversation. Any sudden emotion might prove fatal to the patient in his present condition; on the other hand if Dot could inspire in him a wish to live, he was of opinion that Bob might still be saved. Yet, how was he to induce his daughter to transfer her affections from one man to the other? The task seemed beyond his power, even were it right to attempt it. The issue must lie with God. Bob was closeted for a whole hour with the lawyer, and when Doctor Lankester re-entered the sick room, he was surprised to find him considerably stronger and more

cheerful. Strange to say, the exertion appeared to have done him good, and his mind was evidently easier than it had been for some time past.

“Now, please, fetch Dot,” he called out impatiently, directly his medical adviser approached.

“Have you not done enough for to-day?” rejoined that gentleman. “Don’t you think it will be wiser to wait till to-morrow?”

“Perhaps so, if I could make sure of there being one for me. Oh! Doctor Lankester, if you knew how badly I want to see her you would not refuse my request.”

His words contained a touching pathos, which went straight to the good doctor’s heart. He would have given half he possessed to ensure for Bob not one but many to-morrows; the sick man was so gentle and patient. He recognised with

such docility and submission that life was but nature's plaything—a toy to be broken up at any moment, and hurled into the unfathomable abyss of eternity. He repined not, neither did he bemoan his hard fate. He was content to go—content to leave the cold, pitiless earth, the winter snows and summer sunshine, content even to part from his beloved ; because she was not *his* beloved, but another's.

Only a little common tragedy every day played out to the bitter end by men and women possessing loving and tenacious hearts. As Dot had truly said, “ Oh ! the pity of it. The pity of it.”

Quarter of an hour afterwards, the girl entered Bob's presence. He had altered so much in these few days that she hardly knew him, and the change shocked her to such an extent that she was seized by a fit of trembling. For his sake she had determined to be brave and composed.

What were her bravery and composure worth, since at one sight of the invalid they vanished?

The tears trickled down her cheeks, and she bowed her head and sobbed aloud.

Her emotion affected him deeply.

“Dot,” he said in a quivering voice, “don’t cry, dear. There’s nothing to cry about.”

“Oh! Mr. Jarrett, I—I can’t help it. I meant to behave well, indeed I did.”

“Call me Bob, will you? I should like to hear you call me by my Christian name just for once, and,” with a spasm of pain, “I don’t think Will would be jealous.”

“Hush!” she cried, in an altered voice, “don’t talk of Will.”

“I must. It is for that purpose I have sent for you. The other day you told me that you wanted five thousand pounds——”

“Oh, Mr. Jarrett—Bob, pray don’t think of my foolish words.”

He raised himself on one elbow, and looked at her.

“Dot,” he said, “I hope you believe that I love you well enough to serve you.”

“Yes, yes, indeed. I don’t deserve such love as yours.”

“If it pleases me to make you a gift of five thousand pounds, and to render you and Will happy, you won’t refuse me, will you? It is the last favour I may ever ask.”

To his surprise, she flung herself down by the bedside, and began sobbing as if her heart would break.

“Dot!” he said in alarm, “what have I said? What have I done?”

“Oh!—you—you are—so good. Your generosity—touches m—me to the quick. But—I—I—cannot take this money. Be-

sides," she added despairingly, "it is of no use to me now."

"Why not? Are you too proud to accept even this small gift from me?"

"Proud! No, but I am crushed and miserable. Love, faith, honour, everything seems unreal and a delusion, and the ideals I have raised, the gods before whom have bowed down and worshipped, prove brazen images that topple down at a touch." And her eyes shone fiercely.

"Dot, what do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"You said you were my friend, Bob. I wonder whether you will understand me? I have suffered the pains of Purgatory for five whole days, and never spoken of them to a soul. Now I feel as if I could keep my sufferings to myself no longer, and must talk to somebody. Five thousand pounds," and she laughed hysterically. "*You give me* five thousand pounds! How noble, how

generous, how good ! But what is it for ? what is it for ? ”

“ To enable you to marry Will,” he said as steadily as he could, for the force of her passion shook him.

She drew in her breath with a sharp, hissing sound, and when she spoke next it was in a cold, constrained voice.

“ Will will not marry me. He is married already.” . . .

At these words, the life blood seemed to come tingling and surging back through Robert Jarrett’s veins. It was as if an electric shock had been administered, which diffusing vitality over his whole being, snatched him from the very jaws of death. Will married ! Dot free ! Good God ! how different the future appeared all at once ! In the suddenness of his joy, he almost forgot the girl’s misery and despair. Then, as he looked at her tear-stained face, a mighty compassion made his heart swell.

How she suffered, and he too had suffered, and knew what unfortunate love meant.

He put out his hand in silent sympathy, and she clasped it nervously, bowing down her head, until he could feel the hot, salt tears dropping one by one upon it.

“Dot, dear,” he said presently, “tell me how this came about. You need not be afraid of me.”

She stooped her lips to the hand which she held in her own, and kissed it with a sudden impulse.

“I loved him so,” she said brokenly, “I thought him so good, and true, and noble. . . . I would have stuck to him all my days, and not minded how poor he was, or—or what I did for him. And now it seems as if it were n—not Will I had cared for all these years, but some poor, contemptible thing who w—when he got weary of my blind adoration had not even the courage to tell me so. But that is the

way with we poor foolish women. We put our lovers up on such high pedestals, that they come tumbling down with a crash, and shatter our weak hearts to pieces. . . .”

He let her ramble on as she liked, knowing that before long she would tell him all. He saw her smarting under the first cruel pains of disillusion, of wounded pride and outraged affection. It was only natural that she should pour forth her piteous tale incoherently, and he lay back on his pillow, uttering a soft word of sympathy now and again, and trying to prevent the mad joy that possessed him from becoming too apparent. He felt that it was indecent—nay, selfish, yet would he have been mortal had not his brain reeled with intoxication at the thought that, should God spare his life, he might noww in Dot? —Dot, whose sweet feminine disposition revealed itself in every word !

This was the sum and substance of her tale.

For months past Will's letters had grown rarer and shorter. The girl treasured them up, and never wearied of making fresh excuses for the writer, though her woman's instinct told her that his love was no longer the same as formerly. Time and distance had cooled its ardour in a marked degree. But she struggled against the conviction, as would do any tender trusting girl in her place, and flew to meet him at the railway station, full of fluttering hope and sweet forgiveness. At the first touch of his lips she felt that some subtle alteration had taken place, that, in short, an estrangement, though none of her making, divided them. He had hinted at confidences, at news which it was imperative to break, and yet maintained a torturing reserve. His talk was chiefly about the new practice, and how it was to be ac-

quired, and he succeeded in impressing Dot with a notion that it was her duty to find the requisite five thousand pounds, and if she failed in doing so, the engagement between them must be considered at an end.

“ Will said he should find the money if I didn’t,” sobbed poor Dot, through her tears; “ that a man had no right to spoil his whole career on account of an early attachment, and hinted that there was somebody else willing to marry him at a moment’s notice.”

“ The brute ! ” ejaculated Bob indignantly. “ Just fancy any man being such a fool as to throw away a treasure like you.”

Dot sighed and wept.

“ I loved him so—I loved him so,” she repeated piteously. “ But he was not what I thought or he never could have acted as he did. If he had cared for me really, it

would have been impossible to him to marry another woman, simply because she had a few thousand pounds and I had not. It is a terrible shock to discover the worthlessness of a person you have looked up to since your childhood. I feel as if I should never recover from it. See, here is the letter he sent me five days ago, every word of which is branded on my memory in characters of fire."

Bob, though tired, managed to read the contents, which were as follows :

“ Dear Little Dot,—When I met you at the railway station you looked so pretty and were evidently so glad to see me, that I could not bring myself to tell you certain things which you had a right to know. I am a poor devil who has to gain his own living, and who cannot afford to marry the girl of his choice. Those five thousand pounds of which we spoke were essential to my career.

I knew that I could not look to find them with you, and so—and so (you will think me a beast, and God knows I feel like one) I became engaged to a wealthy widow, several years older than myself, who for some rhyme or reason, appeared to have taken a great fancy to me. When you get this all will be over and I shall be married to her. Dot, can you—will you forgive me?—Yours in heart still, WILLIAM BARRINGTON.”

“The cur!” ejaculated Bob contemptuously. “He is faithful, neither to the woman he professes to love, nor to the one he has basely married for her money. Don’t be angry with me, Dot, for saying so, but I think you have had a lucky escape.”

She made no answer. Was it possible that he was right? She could not admit the fact just at present, though her aching

heart cried out that it had been cruelly and treacherously deceived.

“This Will Barrington never could have been worthy of you from the beginning,” continued Bob. “A man capable of writing such a letter as that is a poor, mean-spirited hound.”

“If only he had trusted me,” said Dot bitterly, “and told me the truth, I think I could have forgiven him everything, but now—now,” and her voice shook, “I have not only lost Will, but all my faith and belief in human nature as well; so much has gone that never can come back.”

Bob gave the hand he still held in his own a gentle pressure.

“My dear, my love,” he said, “you have indeed been cruelly treated, but don’t fall into the mistake of thinking that all men are blackguards, and incapable of a true affection. Dot, darling, if you would let me try to restore your faith in man, I

should very soon get well. It is you I want, you, without whom life is unendurable."

The tears gushed afresh to her eyes. What was this feeling stirring her heart? Had she turned traitor so soon? "Don't ask anything of me now," she cried out in alarm. "You must give me time—you must give me time."

A radiant smile lit up Bob's pale face. Something in her tone and manner made him hope. "I will be very, very patient, and wait even as Jacob did for Rachel."

She drooped her head and did not speak.

When Doctor Lankester returned from his rounds some half-an-hour later, he found Dot crying softly to herself and the patient fast asleep. He felt his pulse and turned to the girl with a look of inquiry.

"Why, Dot!" he exclaimed, "what treatment have you been pursuing?"

Robert Jarrett is a different man already. He has managed to turn the corner and will live."

She glanced up at her father; then turned her blushing face away.

How could she speak to him of the strange revolution going on within her bosom? How tell him that a new love was springing up from the very ashes of the old?

But perhaps Dr. Lankester understood without being told.



CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

FROM that day Bob mended rapidly. He had something to hope for now—a new object in life. Nevertheless two months went by before he regained his usual health, and then Doctor Lankester strongly advised his leaving England whilst the cold spring winds lasted. After much conversation, it was ultimately settled between this pair of friends that Bob should return to Australia, in order to wind up his affairs there, and escort his mother and sisters to their new home. But before going on so long a journey, he felt he must speak to Dot; she had been very shy and quiet of late, and yet the small germ of hope that

had been planted in his heart whilst he lay so ill, had gone on growing ever since.

About a fortnight prior to his departure, he sought her out.

“Dot,” he said, “I am going away.”

“Yes,” she answered in faltering tones, “I know that.”

“Have you nothing to say to me before I leave?”

“What can I say?” she demanded with evident embarrassment.

“You told me once that—that I must give you time. I have tried and am trying very hard still to be patient; but Dot, dear, if you could speak one little word before I leave England, or give me the least encouragement, you don’t know how happy it would make me.”

She was trembling all over.

“What—what—do you want?”

He advanced a step nearer, and held out his arms with infinite yearning.

“I want you to tell me truly, if you think you can ever get to care for me a little bit? I don’t mean just yet. I have no right to expect that ; but after a while —even a long while if you like it best—is there any chance of my being able to win you ?”

He stopped abruptly, and for a few seconds she maintained absolute silence.

Then she began twitching at the corner of her pocket-handkerchief, and at last in a very subdued way, as if heartily ashamed of herself, said almost inaudibly, “I don’t know what you will say to me. You will think me a most horribly capricious, changeable person, in short no better than a weathercock, but—but——”

“But what, Dot? For God’s sake speak out, and let me know the worst.”

The small, sweet face broke up into smiles, a dear little dimple showed on the rounded chin, and the clear, frank eyes

looked straight into his, with an expression which made his heart beat fast. “ You have won me already. I care for you a very great deal as it is.”

Here was an astounding discovery. Bob could hardly believe his senses.

“ And Will ? ” he cried sceptically, “ what about him ? ”

The colour flew to her cheeks, dying them a vivid crimson. He meant no reproach to her constancy, but she construed it as one.

“ I knew you would think poorly of me,” she resumed humbly and apologetically. “ I think poorly of myself, and often wonder if it is I—I, Dot Lankester, who have changed so much in such a short space of time. You have a perfect right to doubt the sincerity of my affection. Appearances are all against me. Perhaps some girls can continue to care for a man they no longer respect and esteem. I

could not. It was not the actual Will Barrington I loved, but an ideal raised by my imagination. I see it now, though at the time I suffered tortures. Bob, I am not really changeable and inconstant, though probably you believe so, and if, in spite of the past, you care to make me your wife, I will do my best that you shall not regret it."

Bob was wild with delight. In the first ecstasy of his love, he vowed he would put off going to Australia, and spend the summer at Straightem Court. But Mrs. Lankester suggested a plan which positively fired his brain. "Why not," she said, "get married quietly, and take Dot out with you, as a surprise to your mother and sisters? There's not the least reason for any delay." The good lady went on the principle of striking when the iron is hot.

Bob hailed this idea rapturously. Of course, Dot said No, when it was first

mooted to her, and, equally, of course, the ardour of her lover and the united wishes of her parents succeeded in removing her objections. “Why not? Why shouldn’t she be happy, and see a little of the world when she got a chance? She found it impossible to answer that question, or to resist the pressure put upon her.

So they were married without any fuss or ceremony, and a few days afterwards, started off for Australia on their honeymoon. Of their various adventures *en route* it is unnecessary to speak. Suffice it that Dot completely won the hearts of her new relations, and after a delightful stay in Bob’s old home, the whole party, with the exception of Dick, who was comfortably installed in the farm, returned to Straightem Court.

Before people had fairly got over the astonishment occasioned by Mr. Jarrett’s wedding, there came another which sur-

prised them still more. Lord Littelbrane conducted Lady De Fochsey to the hymeneal altar, thus administering a death-blow to the already disorganised Mutual Adorationites. Shortly after this event, his lordship was so shocked by the behaviour of some of his satellites, who actually left their cards on Mrs. Jarrett, and vowed she was a very pretty, charming woman, that he resigned the mastership of the Morbey Anstead hounds in disgust. But he was still more annoyed when Bob took them, and by the end of his first season effected a complete revolution in the manners and customs of the Hunt. The new master soon became exceedingly popular with all classes, encouraged the presence of strangers, was civil and pleasant to everybody, and quite put Lord Littelbrane's nose out of joint.

But that unfortunate nobleman had other causes of dissatisfaction. As the years rolled on, he became a thoroughly

unhappy, dissatisfied and henpecked man, who hated and feared his wife, without daring to give vent to his sentiments in her presence. He had indeed made an unlucky venture, for sad to say, Lady Littelbrane disappointed expectation ; no son and heir appeared to continue the aristocratic race, and his theories of selection turned out no better than theories generally do.

By some strange, horrible and capricious freak of Nature, the long thought of and deeply pondered combination of beauty and birth, health and rank, youth and talent, failed to produce the desired results. No little sweet, shrill voices sounded in the Littelbrane apartments, no childish feet could be heard patterning down the long corridors.

Year after year his lordship's hopes faded away, and the Castle became a scene of many marital squabbles.

For Lady Littelbrane did not improve with age. She grew sharper of tongue, shorter of temper, more restless, frivolous and vain. She filled the house with fast young men, mostly of the parasitic order, and carried on bare-faced flirtations with them under the very nose of her unhappy lord, whose notions of social decency were terribly shocked by such conduct. But it was useless expressing disapproval. His wife could master him, and knew it ; so that he got very little domestic peace.

His chief pleasure consisted in creeping out to dine with old General Prosieboy whilst she was entertaining some of her gay acquaintances at home.

Sad to relate, that staunch warrior had made friends with the Mammon of Unrighteousness, although after a bottle of wine he would still converse fluently about the departed glory of the Mutual Adorationites.

For their sun was on the wane. The M.A.'s, indeed, almost ceased to exist. The majority had gone over to the enemy, and pretty Mrs. Robert Jarrett made many converts amongst their ranks. Her kindness, cheeriness and sweet simplicity were hard to resist. Even the ladies, who at first turned up their noses at Dot, as "a little country doctor's daughter," were forced in time to admit that she was "quite a nice, refined and altogether unobjectionable person."

And Bob? Our honest, out-spoken, manly, rough Australian of the big heart and unpolished manners?

It may please some to hear that he was very happy with his little wife, and that they both considered their good fortune should make them extra tender to others, less lucky than themselves.

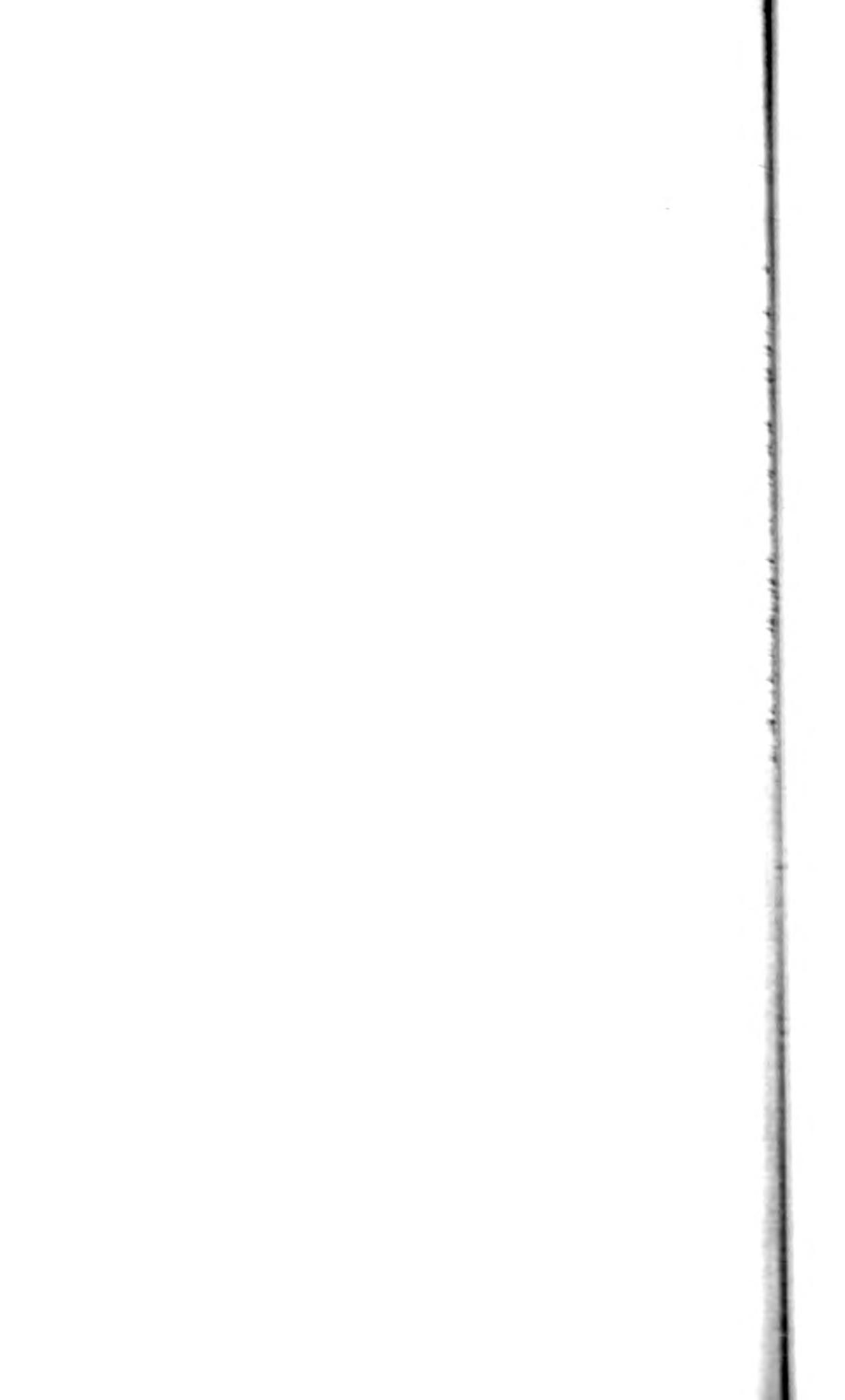
There is not such another pair of match-makers in the county.

What between looking after his estate,

his hounds and his children, Bob has plenty of good honest employment, which saves him from sinking down into a mere selfish and luxurious Sybarite, intent upon nothing but gratifying his own wants and wishes.

Possibly, the sharp lesson he received from a small section of English gentlemen on his first arrival in England, though not pleasant at the time, had a salutary effect, and taught him that even in the mother country there are a good many things not worthy of imitation. He may have learnt that to be kind and charitable, unselfish and unaffected, make a man a finer gentleman than possessing smart clothes, having a bitter tongue, and an inordinate opinion of I—I—I.

THE END.





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